

やはり俺の 青春ラブコメは まちがっている。

My youth romantic comedy is
wrong as I expected.

渡 航【wataru watari】

illustration ぽんかん⑧



11
eleven

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一色いろは
iroha issiki

比企谷八幡
hachiman hikigaya



雪ノ下雪乃
yukino yukinoshita

由比ヶ浜結衣
yui yuigahama



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登場人物【character】

eleven



比企谷八幡.....主人公。高二。性格がひねくれている。
【ひきがや-はちまん】

雪ノ下 雪乃.....奉仕部部長。完璧主義者。
【ゆきのした-ゆきの】

由比ヶ浜 結衣.....八幡のクラスメイト。周りの顔色を伺いがち。
【ゆいがはま-ゆい】

戸塚 彩加.....テニス部。とても可愛い男子。
【とつか-さいか】

川崎 沙希.....八幡のクラスメイト。ちょっと不良っぽい。
【かわさき-さき】

葉山 隼人.....八幡のクラスメイト。人気者。サッカー部。
【はやま-はやと】

戸部 翔.....八幡のクラスメイト。葉山グループのお調子者。
【とべ-かける】

三浦 優美子.....八幡のクラスメイト。クラスの女子の頂点に君臨する。
【みうら-ゆみこ】

海老名 姫菜.....八幡のクラスメイト。三浦グループだが腐女子。
【えびな-ひな】

一色 いろは.....サッカー部マネージャー。一年生で生徒会長に当選。
【いっしき-いろは】

折本 乃おり.....八幡と同じ中学。海浜幕張総合高校生。
【おりもと-かおり】

平塚 静.....国語教師。生活指導担当。
【ひらつか-しずか】

雪ノ下 陽乃.....雪乃の姉。大学生。
【ゆきのした-はるの】

比企谷 小町.....八幡の妹。中学三年生。
【ひきがや-こまち】

Oregairu Volume 11

Chapter 1

It's been some time since we entered the month of February.

The winter chill was still as harsh as ever and every time the arid north wind blew by, the glass windows of the classroom would rattle.

By the time short homeroom for the rest of the day had ended, the temperatures plunged even further. My seat, close to the hallway, unfortunately didn't receive much heating and small breezes would slip in through the unnoticeable gaps of the doors. When they brushed against the nape of my neck, I shuddered.

However, I looked over at the windows and the sun was still elevated high in the sky. The length of the afternoon had progressively gotten longer

According to the calendar, the vernal equinox was coming up soon. But every year around this time when it's this cold, you ended up thinking, "How could you even call this spring, is 'Spring Has Come'¹ playing in your head all the time or something?"

But there's also the saying: "If winter comes, can spring be far behind?"²

It was after school and the atmosphere of the class was showing steady signs of the upcoming spring.

A little less than a month to go and that would mark the awakening of insects³ on the calendar.

Thanks to the effective heating in the classroom, my classmates had suddenly become animated just like how insects, frogs, and snakes

¹ Spring Has Come is a song composed by Hata Motohiro

² An Ode to the West Wind

³ Solar term used in East Asian calendars which typically refers to around March 5 until March 20

would wake from their hibernation slightly earlier than expected by the calendar.

The window side of the classroom looked especially warm due to the heating being right below the window frames. A single group occupying that area was incredibly lively in spirit. Today like every other, I could hear their loud, conspicuous voices.

“Man, I could go for something sweet any time today,” Tobe said, flapping the ends of his hair. Oooka and Yamato hit their knees as though they knew what Tobe was talking about and pointed at him.

“You got that right.”

“Totally.”

Then, the three exchanged gazes.

“You know what I mean.....? Better *chocolate* than never, yeah?” Tobe said, being pointlessly dramatic. The three of them made triumphant looks and shot glances over at the girls... *Mmm, I thought we were nearing spring, but it still feels like we’re in the middle of winter!*

But Miura’s reaction was far more callous and cold compared to their trite act.

“...Ha?”

After a small click of her tongue, she gave the idiot trio an apathetic look that shut them up. Yuigahama and Ebina-san made a stiff smile.

“Oh yeah, it’s about that time of the year, huh...?” Hayama said, taking the middle ground between the two groups. Oooka and Yamato nodded their heads.

“You’ve got it good Hayato-kun, but we’re pretty screwed.”

“True.”

Oooka stated solemnly while Yamato nodded in assertion. His words certainly did make it sound like it was a serious problem. *Still, this opportunistic virgin's jealousy is so garbage that it's kind of wonderful...* I thought. Then, Tobe made a giddy smirk while patting Hayama's shoulder.

"Nah, Hayato-kun usually doesn't accept anything."

"Are you kidding!? What a waste!"

Oooka shouted causing Hayama to make a strained laugh. *I see, he likely chose that route so he could avoid unnecessary trouble.*

However, for girls that were in love with him, they might not be so eager to accept that. The head of that pack, Miura, was listening in on their conversation in silence while facing away from them with a disinterested expression.

Watching her, Yuigahama went "ah" and spoke.

"But hey, it's kinda scary getting things from people you don't know." Yuigahama nodded her head to show she could sympathize with him.

Following her, Ebina-san struck out her hand with a serious look and stopped the conversation. "Wait. If he won't accept anything, that means... he'll take them instead. So the one getting taken would be Hikitani-kun?"

The moment she finished, Miura flicked her head. *What the hell is she saying with that serious look of hers...?* Miura took out a pocket tissue and pressed it on Ebina-san.

"Ebina, your nose is bleeding."

"Oh, thanks, thanks."

Ebina-san held back her suspicious laughter as she blew her nose and Miura showed a soft smile. Being immediately next to the heating as

well as various other factors, all the individuals gathered over there looked rather warm.

No, they weren't the only ones. The entire classroom was enveloped by the same warmth. The giddy mood wasn't limited only to the idiot trio of Tobe and the other two, but other groups spread out in the classroom.

Officially, Valentine's Day was coming very soon.

In other words, it's the day you received chocolate from your mom and little sister.

Valentine's Day was a day full of blessed love, but that understanding wasn't without problems. Considering how the event came to be, it's actually a day when blood was shed. Originally started from a saint, it's also the day a struggle occurred between gangs. Besides, someone from Chiba wouldn't even think twice about chocolate because they'd think about Bobby⁴ instead.

But it didn't matter what the opinions of someone like me had, it's impossible to overturn the general understanding of the event. In fact, if I were to preach the event as a conspiracy of the current confectionary industry, I'd easily be branded a heretic.

Valentine's Day had already firmly taken root in the culture of Japan. Christmas was more or less similar in that regard. Eventually, Halloween might even get adapted to Japanese customs, too. The summer festival, the Bon Festival dance, or the graveyard visits during the spring or fall equinoxes weren't all that much different.

Basically, it's an issue of whether you liked them or hated them. No one's questioning that they're orthodox or blasphemous. If you're going to reject them, whether it's Christmas or Valentine's day, you should just scream, "I hate them!"

Since Komachi would slyly give me chocolate every year, I didn't hate Valentine's Day all that much. As a matter of fact, since I loved Komachi

⁴ Bobby Valentine was a manager for the Chiba Lotte Marine baseball team.

so much as her older brother, I was anxiously waiting for the day to come.

I wonder what kind of expensive chocolate she's going to force out of me as a return gift this year... As I engrossed myself in happy thoughts about wasting money on my little sister, the class grew boisterous.

"God, I'm not going to make it!"

"It's okay, you still have time! Just keep going! Don't give up!"

I casually looked over and a caste of girls sitting at different seats, either the second or third group from the top, was knitting some kind of muffler or sweater. It's almost like I was listening to a conversation between a light novelist and his editor. *Look, normally, you're not going to make it. It's almost Valentine's Day and your progress is only at about ten percent. Rather than putting effort into making it on time for the deadline, it'd be more productive and realistic to try to extend it instead!*

As it turns out, I wasn't the only one watching that heartbreaking exchange.

Miura was twirling her hair with her fingers and breathed out.

"...Well, handmade things might be too pushy? Makes sense why you wouldn't accept them."

After listlessly saying those words, a faint sigh came from a different direction.

"Pushy... I guess so..." Yuigahama rubbed the bun of her peach-colored hair with her thin fingers that stretched out of her slightly loose cardigan. She then made a troubled, but embarrassed smile.

After seeing that smile, something suddenly came to mind from some time ago.

—*Handmade, huh?*

Just who was she making those cookies for? As I thought that, I looked towards her and our eyes met. Yuigahama and I averted our faces away in reaction.

“Well, it’s the feelings that count, not what you get.”

Hayama’s voice had a strained ring to it.

“You got that right! Nah, but see? I’m totally all over that, you know what I mean?” Tobe immediately hit his knees and expressed his agreement. Diagonally from him, Ebina-san crossed her arms and slid her gaze to the side.

“But you can’t screw up with handmade chocolate or else you’ll get exposed. And since it doesn’t cost that much to begin with, that’s kind of off-putting. Wouldn’t it be easier to just buy premade ones instead?”

“Yeah, totally!”

As soon as Ebina-san finished, Tobe changed his opinion... *Come on, you could at least try a little harder.*

“...Mmhmm, handmade, huh?”

Following Miura’s disinterested voice was a burst of their cheery laughs.

There existed a division in their group just a little while ago, but it was no longer there.

Hayama was sincerely acting as the Hayama Hayato that everyone sought while Miura was slowly, but surely trying to shorten their distance in her own way. As for Tobe and Ebina-san, well, they looked the same as always, but after some time had passed, they had created a mood that fit them both.

And Yuigahama happily watched them.

The classroom was restless, but even so, their place which had leisurely grown warm like the slow transition to spring was a little too bright to watch from the side that I slightly closed my eyes.

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The air permeating the hallway leading to the special building was frigid and parched. I felt my lips crack and my body stiffen.

Condensation was visible on the glass windows of the classroom, but not the hallway which had a clear look into the school courtyard. It was filled with shedding trees and bare beds of flowers, a dusty and dark brown spectacle of winter unlike one seen in the northern parts of Japan.

Not very much snow fell in Chiba. The scarce amount was prominent even in the Kanto region of Japan that was unfamiliar with snow. Last month, the news reported snow falling in Tokyo, but not a single drop was seen in Chiba.

The lack of anything wintry made it superfluously cold. Feeling the difference in warmth from the classroom I was in earlier, I lifted up the muffler wrapped around my neck.

The reason why that place in class felt warm wasn't because of how close it was to the heating. It's because the fissures that plagued it were filled.

I'm sure Hayama and everyone weren't waiting dramatically for their final moments, but peacefully and warmly, as if exactly the way the world and life would end. The reality that bliss and peace was maintained through everyone's efforts had sunk in.

It's possible that the experience of going through numerous winters allowed them to understand that spring would eventually arrive.

Waiting ahead for us wasn't a spring of warmth, but a spring of parting. Like the storm which comes when flowers bloom, the good friend goes away.

Our classes would change and we would build new human relationships. Next year, this season was the time we'd be right in the middle of testing and no longer be required to go to school. That's why,

everyone enjoyed and valued this winter, peacefully waiting for it to come to an end.

In that, there's an apparent warmth as well as a faint chill. I mumbled "cold, cold" into my muffler as I walked and the sound of light footsteps echoed from behind.

I turned around and my shoulder received a light shock. I was met with a glum look from Yuigahama.

"Why'd you leave first...?"

"You didn't say anything about leaving together..." I said unpleasantly, not having an idea of why she took that attitude.

Yuigahama's mouth dropped open and she gently brushed her hair in embarrassment. "...Oh, I totally thought you were waiting for me. You stayed in class for a while, so..."

"That's not really..."

While speaking, I gave some thought to the reason why I stayed behind. It's true that Yuigahama invited me to head to club together several times. Perhaps that's why I found myself waiting with the assumption that she'd come over to talk to me.

But another proper reason came to mind.

"Yeah, I just wanted to see how Hayama and Miura were doing."

"Ahh, right. I think they're good now, so I'm glad."

Yuigahama let out a small breath and weakly nodded. She then proceeded a few steps ahead of me in the empty hallway and twisted her body.

"It's kinda nice, you know? I'm sure everyone's thinking about all kinds of stuff, but it's like they're trying to live their lives as much as they can now while cherishing it..."

She stated each word in emphasis, wearing a gentle smile on her expression.

“Yeah, I guess. We’re probably having the best time of our lives right now.”

“Ohh, you’re unusually positive...”

“When you recall the past, you want to die from regret and when you think about the future, you get depressed from anxiety. So by elimination, our time now is pure bliss.”

“You were being negative, after all!” Yuigahama dropped her shoulders with a sullen look. She then briskly walked ahead and voiced her complaints. “There you go again with that stuff... Can’t you read the mood?”

“Mood, huh...?”

Like what kind of mood?

For example, the mood on Valentine’s Day?

I suppose I could understand in that case. Occasionally, I’d learn from the masses, take in the mood, and play it off. Then, I’d just brush it all off with a simple “it’s what everyone’s doing.” Doing that made you want to have expectations, be spoiled, lose yourself, and wait.

But I don’t think that’s something you should do.

It’d be insincere if all you did was wait. Regardless of the answer and conclusion awaiting you at the end of the tunnel, you should make sure to take that step forward without deception and incredulity and leave the regrets for afterwards.

That’s why, I took in the mood and decided to ask now.

“By the way...”

I squeezed out those words with a hoarse voice and Yuigahama turned around. Her inclined head and her eyes urged me to go on. Seeing her straight-on was somewhat dazzling that I slightly averted my face.

“...Do you have a day you’re free on soon?”

“Huh? U-Um, yeah, I do... I think, “ Yuigahama said, prattling on and moving her hands in surprise. She fidgeted as she frantically took out her cellphone. But then, her movements abruptly stopped.

She shot a glance to the door of the club. After that, she had trouble bringing out her voice. And unlike earlier, her expression sank.

I was slightly surprised to see that and hesitated to ask why she was making that face, finding myself choking as well. The air in the hallway was awfully cold and dry that I had an uneasy sensation as if something was stuck in my throat.

Asking her that now in this place might’ve not been the best choice. Or perhaps, there might’ve been a better or smoother way to do so. Would it be weird to ask again? I just wasn’t confident in any of those.

Unable to exchange any more words, I glanced at her face, my back still slumped and my eyes downcast. The problematic smile that she wore caused me to lose my breath.

To fill up the silence, Yuigahama quickly said, “Let me think about it and I’ll tell you later!”

“...Y-Yeah.”

Was I relieved or just exhausted? Perhaps, something much more different?

Whatever it was, since I had let out a deep sigh at the same time, Yuigahama didn’t wait for my response, walked a few steps ahead, and opened the door to the clubroom.

The door flung open. We walked through it and the room inside was enveloped by an air of coziness.

There were far more people in the classroom, yet strangely enough, I found it more comfortable here. Though, that could've been just a side effect of the sunlight that easily penetrated this clubroom in the special building.

With the gentle sunlight pouring on to her, sitting at her usual seat was Yukinoshita Yukino.

She lifted up her face from the paperback in her hand, quietly brushed her hair upwards, and softly smiled. "Hello."

"Yahallo, Yukinon."

"Sup."

Yuigahama responded with a raised hand while I returned my typical greeting and we proceeded to take our respective seats.

I wasn't sure exactly when, but this seat had become my place. No one had qualms with me sitting here, nor did anyone decree I had to, nor did anyone force me to. It was far more pleasant than I was expecting it to be.

And that alone was reason enough for me to feel pangs of discomfort from the presence I wasn't accustomed to seeing.

"Senpai, you're *so* sloooooow."

"And why are you here again...?"

Laying on the desk while indignantly kicking her feet was this school's resident Student Council President, Isshiki Iroha. Her gestures, whether it's her intentional sullen look or the way she was averting her face, were

all so sly... *No, but seriously, I can't believe she got here earlier than Yuigahama and me. Is she trying to be as swift as some kind of breeze?*⁵

"I asked her if she had some business here, but she wanted to wait for you two to come. So, she's been here ever since," Yukinoshita said, mixed with a sigh. She then deliberately sent an even colder glance to her. Despite that, she didn't forget to be hospitable and had prepared some tea for her. There's just so many ways of being hospitable that I want to start a Collection⁶!

As for the aforementioned Isshiki, she wasn't concerned with Yukinoshita's ice gaze. She turned towards me, placed her hand to her mouth, and whispered secretively.

"Yukinoshita-senpai had such a nice smile when I got here, but she got really bummed out right after... She's been acting like that the entire time."

Ahh, really now... Well, duh, every time Isshiki shows up, she's always accompanied with nothing worthwhile, hahaha. No seriously, why are you even here? I thought. Then, there was a weak cough.

"...Isshiki-san?"

Upon looking, Yukinoshita had a broad smile. *Uh oh, it's that smile! The one that Yukinon makes when she's being scary!*

"Y-Yesss! I'm so sorry, I really do have some business here!"

Isshiki ran behind me and pushed me forward, as though it was her conditioned reflex to cower away from that smile. *Hey, stop it, that smile scares the hell out of me too, you know.*

"W-Well, let's calm down. Iroha-chan, are you here for the Student Council?" Yuigahama mediated and waved at her to come back.

⁵ Kantai Collection Shimakaze; coincidentally, also voiced by the same actor.

⁶ Kantai Collection

With a nonchalant face going “Yui-senpai, you’re so nice!” she returned to her original location.

I gave her an inquisitive look asking what she needed. Then, her face became even more nonchalant and she flapped her hand. “The thing is, it feels like I have a lot more free time than I thought I would or something?”

“Huh?”

Again with her nonsense... I hope you didn't forget that you were the one who made us go through all that trouble last time... Or is it because we finished all that work for you that you have nothing better to do? I don't suppose this is one of those burn-out syndromes that happens when you're constantly subjected to cruel labor or something...? But it feels like we're the ones who burned out, so what's her issue again? I gave her a stern look, digging into the meaning of her words.

She placed her index finger to her chin and cutely tilted her head. “There’s like no school events around this time of the year and the VP’s taking care of all the small stuff for me. All I have left is just to stamp our year-end report.”

You don’t say. I wasn’t familiar with what the work of the Student Council entailed, but surprisingly, that’s the kind of things they’re involved in, huh? The third years were well into their testing season while the school administration was occupied with the school entrance exams for new students.

That meant the current students were left unattended. Anyone would have nothing to do because of that.

“That’s why, when there isn’t anything going on, I put the Student Council on break.”

Ohhh, a manager from a white company... Coincidentally, this club that forced us to gather in this room even when there wasn't any work to do was undoubtedly a black company⁷!

And speaking of our resident black company manager, she nodded her head, moving her hand to her chin.

"Don't you have club to attend to as well?" Yukinoshita said, slanting her head to the side.

Isshiki cheeks slightly blushed as if from embarrassment and she sweetly averted her face.

".....It's really cold at the Soccer Club nowadays."

That's something to be ashamed about, not embarrassed. Yukinoshita pressed her hand against her temple in an attempt to hold back a headache while Yuigahama forcibly laughed.

"A-Ahaha... So, what did you need?" Yuigahama asked.

Then, Isshiki cleared her throat and turned her body towards me. "So senpai, I don't really care, but do you like sweets?"

"If you're talking about Hayama, I'm sure he'll be happy to eat whatever you give him."

I understood Isshiki's general behavior all too well. I took the initiative and answered causing her to inflate her cheeks from boredom. Listening to her, Yuigahama seemed to recall something.

"Oh, but it sounds like Hayato-kun's not accepting any chocolate, though."

"Ehhh, why's that?"

"...Wh-Who knows?" Yuigahama inclined her head in confusion.

⁷ • Sweatshops

Then, Yukinoshita let out a brief sigh. "It's obviously because of the disputes that will ensue. During elementary, the classroom the follow day would see sparks flying all over the place..."

"...Ahh."

"...Ahhhh, I think I can see that."

Isshiki and Yuigahama nodded. *Yep, yep, I totally can see that, too. Totally!*

I could easily imagine a huge commotion in the classroom next day where the girls would hold a "So Exciting ☆ Women Only Witch Trials of Absentia! Don't Forget the Betrayals, Too!"⁸ Conversations between girls were mostly about insulting other girls (self-research).

How scary, I thought. Isshiki, who had been living her life being subjected to resentment from the underwor—I mean, the society of girls, let out a shallow sigh.

"Fine, I'll just have to make do with you, senpai. So, do you like sweets?"

"That's one bizarre way of asking me..."

How do you expect an honest answer out of me when it's the same question from earlier? That feeling of being treated like a supplement and her apathy was out of this world. As those thoughts ran through my mind, a chair rocked. I looked over and Yuigahama was leaning forward.

"Hikki likes them a lot!"

"That's true."

On the other hand, Yukinoshita made an overbearing smile with a patronizing chuckle for one reason or another. Pressured by their behavior, Isshiki muddled her words.

⁸ Parody of the Idol Girls Only Swim Meet Tournament

"It's kinda weird how you both answered for him, but... that's good to hear!"

"Right... Wait, what is?"

"I've been wondering how sweet I should make my chocolates, you see. People have their preferences, right?" Isshiki continued, ignoring my question.

Yukinoshita tilted her head. "How sweet... Isshiki-san, are you planning to make them on your own?"

"Now that's a surprise..." I said.

Then, Isshiki made a resentful look. "Why's that? I'm good at making sweets, you know."

"Dang, that must be nice. I wanna learn how to make them too, but I'm just so bad at it..."

Isshiki puffed out her small chest while Yuigahama ducked in her shoulders and hunched over in contrast. *Hmm, that's funny, the chest that's puffing out looks a lot smaller... Is the perspective off or something? In any case, I'll go ahead and request that be fixed for the Blu-Rays!*

Anyway, in Yuigahama's case, she was nowhere near the level of being just bad, but whatever. It's a trivial problem in light of her chest.

"Yui-senpai, cooking is all about being sincere. When you're making something by hand, your feelings of kindness and sympathy are what's important. The shortcut to improvement is to consider the person you're cooking for."

Isshiki gently patted the depressed Yuigahama's shoulders to comfort her and she then erected a finger. With a peaceful smile, she encouraged her.

"After all, we're dealing with boys here who know absolutely nothing about handmade sweets. So, handmade chocolates are a piece of cake. It

doesn't cost much to make a lot and you can add your finishing touches by customizing each one to your liking. The boys will be all over them."

"Your sympathy's gone far beyond the horizon... Even your kindness was purely for your wallet."

"It's more problematic because that way of thinking isn't wrong in the least as well..."

"It doesn't make me happy at all..."

Met with all that feedback, even Isshiki found herself taking a step back. She then forcibly changed the topic as if trying to brush off the topic while groaning.

"Well, that was actually a joke. It's what senpai would say... That being said, I'd like some references for making obligatory chocolate. So senpai, what kind of sweets do you like?"

"What kind, huh...? I guess this."

What I took out was, of course, MAX COFFEE. Why, you ask? It's because it's special to me.

As soon as I placed the can on the table, the three of them focused their stares on me.

Um, what's with those skeptical looks...? There isn't a person in Chiba who'd get upset from receiving this as a sweet. At least, that's what I wanted to say, but everyone's faces looked considerably doubtful...

Yuigahama stared at the can and whispered. "...I bet even I can make that."

"Like hell you can. Quit screwing around and stop looking down on MAX COFFEE. If you're thinking you can just dump condensed milk and sugar into coffee, you're quite mistaken. No, seriously, don't even bother."

"He's actually angry at that!?"

Obviously. It's a completely different beast from just putting condensed milk in coffee. In fact, putting coffee in condensed milk would be more convincing to me. You couldn't achieve that sticky sweetness through normal means. It wasn't something amateurs should stick their heads into.

Isshiki placed the tip of her finger on her lips to think and opened her mouth.

"Actually, that would put me over my budget."

"I don't know exactly how much you plan on making, but you're under a rather severe budget if you're limiting yourself to less than 130 yen a piece..." Yukinoshita said in disbelief, rubbing her temple. That, however, wasn't a concern.

"No problem. MAX COFFEE is cheaper if you pick the right store and buy it in bulk."

"Jeez Hikki, just how into it are you...?"

"It's what happens when you don't get many opportunities to drink sweet stuff. I'm always having to drink bitter stuff, after all." I snorted bitterly.

Then, Yukinoshita brushed aside her hair along her shoulders and wore a tenacious smile. "Bitter things aren't something you drink, but something you experience."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. But the pain I have to deal with doesn't change. In that case, I just want to live the rest of my life drinking sweet juices."

"It sounds like what you're tasting aren't bitter things, but life itself..." Yukinoshita let out a profound sigh.

No, no, it's exactly as you said. I'm totally tasting everything bitter, even life. So based on the aforementioned, life was equal to everything bitter, so life was pain! I thought with these pointless ideas running through my mind.

Isshiki sneered. "Right. I really don't care, though."

How mean. Isshiki gulped down the rest of her tea, placed her paper cup down, and turned towards me.

"I wanted to hear your thoughts on the basics of obligatory chocolate."

"Obligatory chocolate, huh...?"

I scratched my head and sifted through my memories. Unfortunately, I had no experience of receiving any, so I didn't have much to say. The chocolate I received from my little sister was love chocolate!

As though those thoughts showed on my face, Isshiki made an unpleasant snicker.

"Ohh, senpai, you're the type to not get any, huh? But don't boys usually compete over who gets the most chocolate? Won't you hurt your pride as a boy if you don't get anything?"

"Uh, it's not like I need them... When was Valentine's Day a sport?"

There's nothing simpler and clearer than determining the winner by number, but the rules were all over the place. Especially the incoming successive offside traps called obligatory chocolate! It was clearly a red card in that simulation. So, what's an offside trap? Here I am, not knowing a single thing about the rules of soccer.

I rambled on, saying one thing after the other. Isshiki seemed to have taken my ramblings as a bluff and didn't even bother to listen. She then sighed in disbelief while sending me a strangely warm gaze.

"I guess there's no helping you. In that case..."

"You don't need to be concerned for him."

Isshiki was then interrupted by Yukinoshita. She smoothly lifted her hair and wore a composed smile while Isshiki's mouth hung open in contrast.

“Huh...? Don’t tell me, Yukinoshita-senpai, you’re going to—”

Yukinoshita didn’t let her finish speaking and softly chuckled. “Because Hikigaya-kun doesn’t have any friends he could compete with.”

“Oh, that makes sense.”

I found myself nodding in conjunction with Isshiki, and we somehow looked like a couple of hens in a hen house. *Riiight, that totally makes sense. So loners operated under primitive, jobless collectivism when it came to competitions, huh? The only problem is, it’s too primitive and a loner’s just one person.*

When I was on the verge of falling into a thinking pit of what true peace really was, Yuigahama who was sitting on the side puffed her cheeks.

“I don’t think you need to worry... Besides, Hikki will get chocolate... right?” She said and sent me a reserved glance.

I nodded back with a small smile.

“Wha...? You mean...”

Isshiki alternated glances between Yuigahama and me. When her eyes that trembled as though from bewilderment crashed with mine, I instinctively let out a proud laugh.

“Hmph, you got that right... I have Komachi, after all!”

And that’s exactly why I’ll get chocolate! Woohoo! I’m so glad to have a little sister! As long you have a little sister, you’re good!

However, Isshiki tilted her head while blinking in confusion. “Huh? Komachi...? Who’s that? Is that rice?”

“No.”

What, was the staple food at the Isshiki household Akitakomachi rice or something? Heck, just give me some rice from JA-Ugo⁹ or the collaboration rice they have. Then again, please get out there, JA-Chiba.

“Oh, Komachi-chan is Hikki’s little sister.” Yuigahama explained.

Isshiki made a completely apathetic face and let out a flat voice.

“You had a sister, senpai?”

“Yeah.”

I do. She’s a world-level little sister. As a matter of fact, she’s the world’s little sister.

I triumphantly answered and Isshiki stared at me suspiciously. She glared at me, her eyes narrowed as much as possible, and cocked her head to the side.

“...Siscon?”

“No stupid, obviously not,” I said, but the reactions from my surrounding were cold.

“...Um, I’m not too sure if I can deny that,” Yuigahama said. Yukinoshita then looked down with a pensive face. *Oh come on, help me out here.*

Irohasu nodded her head convincingly to their responses. Then, she erected her index finger, moved it to her chin, and tilted her head with a perky smile. “Senpai, you really do like younger girls.”

“No, not really.”

Older, younger, it didn’t matter. I was the type that almightily found most people hard to deal with.

I brushed her off and Isshiki clicked her tongue.

⁹ is an agricultural association that sells rice using anime/manga characters to market their product.

"Then..."

Isshiki coughed to check her throat, sent me a single upwards glance, and immediately looked away.

She tightly gripped one hand at the bosom of her uniform while the other weakly trembled and adjusted her skirt. With moist eyes, the breaths she let out were hot.

Then, she spoke in fragments.

"Do you hate... younger girls?"

I..... do not! Yeah! If you had to ask, I absolutely loved them!

Yuigahama briefly sighed and looked at Isshiki. "You know what, the way you're asking really is the problem..."

"...Yeah, I guess."

Yep, I can agree with that. Though, I was finally starting to get used to it now. Isshiki didn't find that pleasing and looked at me with resentful eyes.

That attitude caused me to make a bitter smile.

Isshiki, her behavior, and her speech were charming, but there were several reasons why her actions didn't affect me all that much in the present. Had I been myself from long ago, I'd lose my wits within the instant, no doubt about it.

There's just one big reason amongst them all, however, and that was simple.

"As long as I have my little sister, I like them either way, older or younger."

"That sounds like a disease far worse than being a siscon or someone into younger girls!"

Yuigahama's tragic scream reverberated in the room and Isshiki nodded in agreement with disgust. *Now you just made me imagine what a slightly older Komachi would look like.* I looked around the room hoping for someone else to agree with me and Yukinoshita was tilting her head with a complicated face and crossed arms.

"The problem is what qualifies someone as younger. Their school year? Birthday? Are they considered younger if their birthday is only a little later...? The definition's rather vague. I believe we should sort that out first, don't you think?" Yukinoshita said, blabbering on.

Yuigahama tapped her hands. "Oh, but hey, Hikki seems like he'd be compatible with an older girl, for sure...! I think, definitely."

She squeezed her fist, putting a lot of strength into it. But I certainly didn't have that obsession, yes.

"...That's not really applicable here. If we're talking about a year gap, it's not that big of a difference."

Like mainly from an income perspective! The important thing was that they could take care of me. And in regards to that, Komachi was perfect. She possessed the talent to become a top breeder.

Isshiki moaned. "Ehh, are you sure? Does Hayama-senpai think that way, too?"

"No idea."

"But senpai, you said that being younger is an advantage, right?"

"Yeah, I guess I did..."

Upon hearing that, I pondered.

Speaking of which, she's a year younger, isn't she...? It certainly didn't feel that way because she didn't show the least amount of regard, honor, courtesy, and respect towards me, so she didn't feel like an underclassman at all...

Seriously, isn't she taking me too lightly? Sure, my initials may be H2, but I wasn't as trivial as hydrogen nor was I in any way related to baseball like a certain baseball manga¹⁰ out there. As a matter of fact, it wasn't even about baseball as it was just a romantic youth comedy. But really, it's so famous I find myself rereading all the volumes every summer vacation.

"If anything, you were born in April, so you're less than a year apart from me. So you don't feel all that much younger than me, anyway."

It's only after I took a couple of steps back that I could feel the gap between us. If we're talking about the age gap from like Komachi or Haruno-san, that was obvious. Hiratsuka-sensei, that'd be... yeah.

Isshiki's really only about eight months away from me and three months from Yukinoshita. I thought. Isshiki didn't seem to be on the same page as I was and blinked at me in surprise.

"....."

"What...?"

"Oh, no... I was just a bit surprised."

When I spoke to her, she fiddled with her front bangs and tried to play it off.

On the other hand, Yuigahama at the side nosily moved her chair back to make some distance from me.

"How the heck do you know her birthday!? That's scary! You're creepy, Hikki... No, seriously..."

"...You seem rather informed." Yukinoshita smiled firmly. Though it's closer to the smile of Nikkari Aoe¹¹ than just a pleasant smile, so there was a transparent feeling of pressure oozing from it.

¹⁰ H2 manga

¹¹ Touken Ranbu – Nikkari Aoe's name sounds similar to "smiling" in Japanese.

“No, Isshiki mentioned it the other day with her pointlessly sly appeal...”

“Did you say pointless!? I-Is not! Actually, I’m not the one being sly, it’s you, senpai!”

Isshiki jumped up from her chair and pointed her finger at me. Actually, I’m not the one being sly, you’re the one normally being sly, Isshiki...

“I have an amazing memory, that’s why... Anyway, if you’re done here, go back to your Student Council or Soccer Club already,” I said.

Isshiki pouted in outrage while reluctantly making her way out of the room. Good grief, this girl’s acting like that again. Yeah, yeah, you’re sly, so sly.

Yukinoshita, Yuigahama, and I smiled wryly as we watched her leave. Then, the Service Club’s door, ahead of where she was heading, was knocked on.

Chapter 2

After a gentle knock, our eyes were locked onto the lightly knocked door for a few moments.

Isshiki was about to leave the room, but after glancing back and forth between us and the door, she quietly returned to her seat. *Well, I can only imagine how awkward it’d be to meet eyes with the visitors on the way out.*

Before long, festive voices came from the other side of the thin wall.

“It’s not like we need their help...”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. Besides, I don’t really know all that much, either.”

The voices consisted of a familiar blunt speaker and a tone that, while amiable, seemed forceful.

There was a knock at the door again, only this time it came across rhythmically.

"Come in," Yukinoshita answered, and the door slowly opened. Appearing within the opening was Ebina-san's face.

"Hallo, hallo! Do you guys have a minute?"

"Hina? Oh, sure, come in, come in!" Yuigahama motioned her in with her hand, and Ebina-san returned a nod. *Indeed, the quicker you enter, the less wind makes it inside. My seat is the closest to the door, after all...*

"Excuse us for the intrusion," Ebina-san said in polite greeting as she entered. Following wordlessly behind her, with a gloomy expression and averted eyes, was Miura.

"What can we do for you?" Yukinoshita asked.

Miura's mouth distorted as she shot a glance at Isshiki. "And why's she here?"

"Oh, you know, that's exactly what I wanted to say... or something!" Isshiki shot back a smile as Miura twirled her hair with a displeased glare.

Oh, what a bizarre atmosphere... I thought. Her perception must have been similar, as Yuigahama came in to mediate. "Ummm, does having more people here make it harder for you to talk?"

"No, not really..." Miura answered, her attitude still curt. This certainly didn't look like she'd be able to talk about anything with ease.

"We can always make Isshiki leave if you want," I offered.

"Huh!? Why!?"

It's not like you're a member of the club or anything... You being here as if it's a given is the abnormality, you know?

Ebina-san patted Miura's shoulder to calm her down. "Now, now, Yumiko. Just think about what you want to talk about, see. If you don't get too specific, it should be fine. Right?"

"That's true... I imagine it may be difficult to discuss... I don't mind, however." Yukinoshita glanced at me, seeking confirmation.

I acknowledged her with a nod. "Well, why don't we just hear you out first? If it's too confusing, you can talk more personally with the others afterwards."

"Uh huh, that sounds good... Oh, but hey, Iroha-chan might have some good ideas, too," Yuigahama added.

Isshiki clearly wasn't pleased with being treated like an outsider, but I slowly inclined my head to Yuigahama, who answered with a relieved smile. I felt rather sorry for her since she had to be considerate to both parties.

"Let's start from the top then," Yukinoshita said, restarting the conversation.

Miura eyed Isshiki for a moment longer, but eventually removed her glare. She fiddled with her hair as though looking for split ends, then opened her mouth to speak.

"...Well, you know? I was kinda thinking about making chocolate... Um, we have exams and all next year... So this is kinda like our last time or something."

She quietly trailed off with a voice dripping with shame and embarrassment. Her cheeks gradually reddened as she spoke.

However, there was some lingering loneliness in her words, though that very well might be something I perceived of my own accord.

Next year, around this time of the season, we weren't obligated to attend school.

It also happened to be right in the middle of the testing season, with exams for private universities being held during this time as well.

Therefore, this was going to be the last Valentine's Day of our high school life. The event would probably have a completely different meaning to us later in our lives.

For example, once you became a university student or a working member of society, you'd probably see Valentine's Day in another light. As an adult, I doubt you'd experience joy from or celebrate receiving chocolate. It's similar to snow: seeing it fall was so rare and fun that you'd get ecstatic from seeing the snow symbol on the weather channel when you were younger. But now, you just saw everything as a bother, whether it's commuting to school, the cold weather, or the thought of getting wet.

"...So like, I figured I'd give it a go or something," Miura continued as she twirled her hair, trying to hide her blush.

The words that came out of her mouth as her hair danced around her fingers were certainly agreeable to some extent.

To those it may be concerned, it was without a doubt the last Valentine's Day of their lives.

That said, there weren't many here who could sympathize with her. Isshiki still had another year left, which meant it didn't feel all that real to her. Her mouth was open as though she didn't find it to be that big of a deal while Yukinoshita was thinking of something with her hand placed to her chin.

Yuigahama, however, inflated her cheeks. She narrowed her eyes and gave Miura a stern look.

"...Yumiko, didn't you say handmade chocolate would be too pushy?"

"...W-Well—" Miura was at a loss for words, quietly trying to avert her eyes. But Yuigahama followed her gaze in a manner that wouldn't allow her to run away.

Ebina-san soothed Yuigahama who was groaning in displeasure. "Now, now, what's the problem? I think making chocolate would be good, too."

"Huh? You're gonna do it too, Hina?" Yuigahama asked, surprised.

"Yep. Well, it's more like I'll be accompanying Yumiko or something like that. It wouldn't hurt to learn myself, anyway."

"Ohh, that's kinda surprising..."

"Really? Like, if I learn, it'd come in handy for goodies at like comiket," Ebina-san went on.

In watching the two converse, I was overcome by a sense of discomfort.

"Oh ho...?"

...Goodies? Goodies, huh? Hmmm? I looked at Ebina-san, finding her words strange, and she turned her head towards me. A glance from beyond the lenses of her glasses questioned me as if asking if there was something wrong. I shook my head in response.

Often, handmade things, either as goodies or presents, were used as formality to maintain a sense of distance outside of friendships. Ebina-san should be aware of this, yet she still sought to know the process of making obligatory chocolate.

In other words, it indicates she's thinking about someone, even if only a little...

...Way to go, Tobe. You're actually making some progress here. Then again, I don't even know if it's Tobe that she wants to give chocolate to because it could be for a complete stranger for all that we know. I mean, seriously, who's Tobe?

With those thoughts running rampant in my mind, a slight warmth began filling my heart as I watched Ebina-san. Then, her eyebrows twitched. She let out a rotten snicker and her glasses sparkled.

“Yeah, you definitely gotta go with handmade chocolate! I think you should try giving Hayato-kun some bro-chocolate, Hikitani-kun!”

“Yeah right, I’m not doing that...”

*Alright, Ebina-san isn’t changing anytime soon... in more ways than one. Anyway, what did she say just now? Bro-choco? Tomo-choco? What the heck is that? Chibi Maruko’s grandfather?*¹²

“It’s not like he’s accepting any, right?”

“You’re in the clear if you’re a guy!”

The idea’s already out of the question from the start.

We had to listen to Ebina-san, though... After all, the person who’d normally stop her was making a troubled face, still fiddling with her hair.

In the meantime, I ignored Ebina-san, who kept going on about bro-choco and homo-choco.

Sitting next to her, Isshiki crossed her arms and groaned. “That’s true. Now it’s much harder for us since he’s already declared he isn’t accepting anything.”

Yep—wait, no, the problem isn’t that, but that we’re both guys here... Hold on, on second thought, he seems like he’d happily accept chocolate from guys since they wouldn’t cause him any trouble... But you know what!? There’d clearly be other kinds of trouble from that instead! And that’s the kind of development that would score zero points with me!

“What should we do...?”

“Haa... Like totally.”

¹² Chibi Maruko-chan

When Isshiki's and Miura's sighs overlapped, they lifted their faces. Their gazes clashed as if fireworks were on the verge of being lit...

Oh man, talk about scary...

× × ×

I went down to the first floor to use the vending machine in front of the school store, where I purchased a can of MAX COFFEE with a *click*¹³.

I let out a profound sigh as I took the can.

As a guy, I couldn't help but shrink in my seat while bearing witness to the ongoing battle between Isshiki and Miura as they silently exchanged sparks. I was tucking in my shoulders so much that I was starting to resemble Slenderman of the Western urban legends.

I got up to clean my hands. Afterwards, I made my way back to the clubroom, sipping my can of coffee to energize my exhausted body. As I climbed the stairs, I spotted an individual loitering around in front of the clubroom door.

She made restless glances periodically, accompanied by the alternating flops and bounces of her blue hair styled in a ponytail.

"...Huh, what're you doing?" I ended up calling out to her, finding her to be too suspicious. Her ponytail jumped and she faced me in a frightful manner.

She was behaving so cautiously that she resembled a mountain cat that would pop out in the middle of the mountains. I had to the urge to click my tongue and use my coffee as bait, but this wasn't the time to be acting so lax while trying to feed a wild animal.

What I should be doing is trying to name her, not lure her in! Umm, let's see... Kawa-something should be good. Heeeey, Kawa-something-san. I called her

¹³ Yatterman – The sound Boyack makes when he presses a button for his gadgets.

internally, asking her what she needed in the process. “Do you need something?”

Upon hearing the question, Kawa-something-san let out a relieved sigh. She then proceeded to motion me over to the end of the hallway with her hand. *Oh, that’s right, her name is Kawasaki Saki-san. I knew that.*

While sending glances towards the clubroom, she asked, “D-Do you have a second?”

“Uh, why not go inside? It’s cold out here.”

From what I could tell, she had some business with the Service Club. Knowing that, I honestly just wanted to get in the heated room as soon as possible. But Kawasaki paused to think and then frantically shook her hands.

“Huh...? Wait, here is fine! I’m fine here! I just had something to ask Yukinoshita, that’s all...”

Why don’t you just ask her directly then...?

“Yukinoshita’s inside if you need her. So just go in already. It’s cold here, and I’ll get sick.”

The hallway of the special building was filled with a frigidity that might’ve been caused by windows being left open to air out some of the classrooms. Chills ran up my body, starting from my feet. The windows rattled in response to the wind blowing in, which sounded like they were shivering in reaction to the wind as well.

“I’m... not all that cold or anything...” Kawasaki said, turning her face away from me.

Well, you might be okay with it, but I’m not... There’d be problems if I were to get sick because of this. Spreading the cold to Komachi, or trying to recover from it, would invite all kinds of issues.

On another note, as a citizen of Chiba, the best way to cure a cold would be to consume as much garlic as possible, doused with a ton of spices. After that, a warm can of MAX COFFEE and some sleep would do the trick. And the following day, you'd find yourself in the hospital. And that's why I think we should stay cooped in at home in order to avoid catching a cold.

The Kawasaki home was also no stranger to housing a test-taking student. Should the younger Kawasaki brother, Taishi, catch a cold and end up infecting Komachi, I may have to dirty my hands with sins and blood...

"Just go in," I coarsely stated, my voice growing sharp due to my hostility towards the poisonous insect called Taishi for daring to approach my Komachi.

Kawasaki caved in. "I-If you say so..."

As long you understand. I'd like to lower the chances of Komachi getting potentially sick and all.

"Well, can't have you getting sick either," I said, opening the door. I nodded to her, urging her to enter.

Appearing dazed, she looked back.

"...O-Okay," she said, answering with a voice in contrast to her intimidating appearance and walking reluctantly inside.

She looks like a delinquent at a glance, but she's really just an honest, good girl you'd find anywhere. I thought as I followed her into the room.

"Welcome back, Hikki... Huh, Saki?"

Yuigahama turned towards us with a curious look, twisting her upper body and cocking her head to the side.

"Ah, yeah..."

With her awkward response, Kawasaki became the center of attention in the room.

Yukinoshita blinked at her in question while Isshiki slightly shrunk in fear. *No, no, Kawa-something-san might look scary, but she really isn't, okay?*

Ebina-san, on the other hand, ecstatically shouted out to her. "Oh, hey there, Saki-Saki. Hallo, hallo!"

"Don't call me Saki-Saki." Kawasaki snarled.

To cool her down, Yuigahama extended a chair to her. "It's pretty rare to see you stop by here, Saki... Then again, this is the first time, isn't it?"

They've must gotten pretty friendly after the field trip for her to be calling her Saki now. I just couldn't keep my tears from flowing knowing that Kawa-something Saki-san was finally able to have someone recall her real name, Saki. Lately, I've been feeling so emotional that even the weekly Precures standing their ground was enough to make me bawl.

Yep, yep, girls getting along is a wonderful thing. Very, I thought as my body warmed up. Meanwhile, Yukinoshita prepared some tea in a paper cup and inquired, "So, what do you need from us today?"

"Th-Thanks... Um..."

Though Kawasaki ignited the conversation, she wasn't quite able to continue. *Oh yeah, she mentioned how she wanted to talk to Yukinoshita about something.* Kawasaki groaned, unsure of how to proceed. She was interrupted by the sound of nails tapping on the table next to her.

From that direction, Miura had a displeased look. Kawasaki, however, wasn't very appreciative of her attitude and stared her down, Miura doing the same thing right back.

"Excuse me, who says we're done with my issues?"

"Ha? You're just drinking tea, aren't you?"

I take back what I said earlier. Kawasaki-san is super scary...

Miura and Kawasaki stared daggers into each other, neither of them giving an inch. *Terrible chemistry between the two of you as always, huh...?* Watching the two caused Isshiki to freeze up.

In that unbending space, Ebina-san interjected. "Okay, okay, calm down, Yumiko. Saki-Saki, you're here to talk about something, right? If you don't mind, we'd like to listen, too."

"I believe we're the ones that'll be helping..."

"Anyway, talk to us, hm?" Ebina-san asked, apparently not lending an ear at all to Yukinoshita's grumbling.

Kawasaki shot glances at Yukinoshita, Yuigahama, and then me. She sighed and spoke.

"Well, I had some questions about making chocolate..."

The instant she asked, Miura guffawed. "What, you're also gonna give someone chocolate? That's hilarious."

"Ah?"

"Ha?"

The two, once again, ferociously exchanged glares.

"...Don't lump me together with you. I'll have you know I'm not interested at all in what you want to do with them."

"Ha?"

"Ah?"

...Stop it! Please get along!

After watching their quarrel, Yukinoshita sighed and shook her head. *Your "how deplorable" face doesn't mean much considering you're just*

like them most of the time... Oh, but, recently, the Yukinon with the jagged heart¹⁴ cutting knife that hurts everyone hasn't been in action that much.

Isshiki mumbled, watching the two girls who wouldn't back down from each other. "Senpai, your acquaintances really are all weird people..."

"Ha?"

"Ah?"

Assaulted by their glares, Isshiki immediately retreated behind me. Remember what I said about stepping on landmines...? You're acting like a dumb cat, you know... And besides, I'm just as scared of these two as you are!

Anyway, let's move the conversation forward since that's the only way to be freed from their hostility.

"So, what's this about chocolate?"

"My little sister heard some things about Valentine's Day at her nursery, and now she wants to make some... Do you know anything small that little kids can make?"

"Anything small that little kids can make..." Yukinoshita nodded, repeating what she heard.

Ebina-san tilted her head. "Weren't you good at household chores, Saki-Saki?"

Oh yeah, Kawasaki takes care of her house quite a bit since both her parents are busy, as well as her having a lot of siblings. I do recall seeing her with shopping bags with a long green onion sticking out of one of them. So that means she should be good at cooking, too. I looked at her and she turned her face away in awkwardness.

¹⁴ Yatterman – The sound Boyacky makes when he presses a buttton for his gadgets.

“...Um, the things I make are kinda plain. I don’t think kids would like them.”

“If you don’t mind telling us, what exactly are you proficient at, Kawasaki-san?” Yukinoshita asked, only to be followed with a silence.

With a stutter, Kawasaki answered, “S-S...”

S... Sweets? That sounds like something kids would enjoy. Back when I was younger, there was a time when I fought with Komachi over the Santa Claus sweet on top of the Christmas cake... Though at the time, we ended up finding out that it wasn’t all that tasty. Komachi and I stopped eating it and left it up to our dad to throw it away.

But what she wanted to say wasn’t what it seemed. Everyone looked at her, waiting for her to continue.

“S-Simmered potato balls...”

...It’s plain.

The room was silenced by her answer that was so unimaginably plain. Everyone’s responses had been so blunt that she started shedding tears, apparently a sign of how embarrassing it was for her.

Realizing that, Yuigahama made a determined face and tried to soothe Kawasaki with an energetic voice.

“That sounds great! I can’t even cook! You’re totally amazing in my book! Right, Yukinon!?”

When asked, Yukinoshita nodded her head in earnest. “That’s true. Potato balls remind me of cat balls, so it’s rather cute don’t you think?”

“Isn’t that follow-up kinda weird!?” Yuigahama turned around with a bewildered face. *You’re totally right, you can’t even call that a follow-up.*

What the heck are cat balls, anyway...? Are you perhaps talking about how cats curl into a ball when they sleep? And when you roll them around, they give you this incredibly displeased look? Okay, sure, even I think that’s pretty cute, even

if only for a little. But long-haired cats are like mops and attract a lot of dust, so be careful there!

Anyway, let's stop thinking about cats and focus on Kawasaki. Then again, that weird follow-up by Yukinoshita embarrassed her even more that she was shaking like a baby kitten that was just given away. I'm so sorry that she doesn't know how to make feel people better...

As compensation, if you could even call it that, I coughed once and added, "Well, if you're able to cook those, you should be good."

"Oh, that's true. It is plain, though..." Isshiki repeated after me and answered. Although she looked confused, she wasn't acting disrespectful or derisive.

"Yep, that's totally something Saki-Saki would make, too!" Ebina-san erected her index finger, flashing an Ebi-Ebi smile.

Kawasaki started squirming this time, clearly finding all the praise uncomfortable, when suddenly she stopped. I followed her gaze; it was directed at Miura, seemingly concerned what she might end up saying.

Miura, however, took a fixed look at her and looked away in disinterest. With a small voice, she whispered as though speaking to no one in particular, "So you can cook."

"Huh? Oh, yeah, I can..."

"Hmmm..."

As she twirled her hair with the tip of her fingers, her voice was slightly tinged with respect. I imagine Miura-san couldn't quite cook herself, either... As a maiden, it might've been a skillset she aspired to have.

"If Kawasaki-san is able to cook, I suppose all we'll need is to pitch a menu of suggestions." Contemplating, Yukinoshita placed her hand to her chin and tilted her head.

"D-Don't forget me! I wanna know, too! If kids can do it, so can I!"
Yuigahama energetically raised her hand.

Yukinoshita sadly lowered her eyes. "...I wouldn't be so sure of that."

"You're being way too honest, Yukinon!"

"Actually, she didn't say that it'd be impossible, so she's being considerate, if anything."

"Just how hopeless do you two think I am!?"

You're just not self-aware enough... When it came to Yuigahama, neither menus nor the process of cooking were the problems. It's her habitual need to throw in her ideas of hidden flavors that made things worse. The thing she made long ago with Yukinoshita had turned into something edible at the end, after all. Well, it's not like there weren't problems with Yukinoshita's teaching either...

"Hey, what about me?"

"Right, right, let us in on this, too!"

Miura and Ebina, looking tired of Kawasaki's side of the story, spoke up in displeasure while Isshiki raised her hand slightly.

"Oh, I'd like to participate for reference."

Seeing them, Yukinoshita sighed.

"I don't mind..." She said, sending me a glance.

"...Well, go ahead and see what you can come up with. They're the ones who'll be doing the work, anyway."

"That's true... You're right; I'll put something appropriate together, so I'd like to have some of your time if you don't mind..."

Yukinoshita looked at Kawasaki, Ebina-san, and then Miura. The three of them nodded back in agreement.

It had been a short while since they had left the club room. The room returned to its peaceful quiet state at last and Yukinoshita let out a quiet sigh.

“Somehow, today feels especially tiring.....”

As we sip the newly brewed red tea, we finally managed to calm ourselves down. There had been an unusual amount of visitors today. Three people in one day. If we included Isshiki, that would make it four. This could perhaps be the highest record of visitors since this club started.

Looking back at the past, business today was really thriving.

This empty room that resembled a storage room could actually turn into such a bustling place. The chairs that were here originally, were put haphazardly, and were facing random directions. But, since some time ago, they had begun to form a sort of distorted circle around a long table that had a tea-set on top.

The clubroom had changed a lot since the past.

The warm air, tea-set and blankets, the paperbacks that had accumulated. The number of chairs as well as the placement of various objects. The intensity of the sun shining in and the coats hanging on the wall.

The room that had been the color of frost, had turned into a hue of warmth following the end of spring.

It wasn't clear at all whether this was due to the changing of the seasons, or maybe there were some other reasons behind it.

The air around us was inducing us into a slumber, making us feel quite uneasy, and so I looked outside the window reflexively.

According to the weather report, there will a massive cold wave these few days, and so right now, a strong wind had already begun blowing.

The sound of the glass rattling and their voices intertwined with one another, reaching my ears clearly.

At this time, the door burst open rudely, making a huge noise. Then, a loud roar rang out.

"Isshiki!"

"Eek!"

Isshiki's shoulders jumped in shock, and she glanced timidly at the door.

Hiratsuka-sensei stood by the doorway imposingly, looking really furious with a frown on her face.

"Sensei, knock....."

"Ah, sorry. Because this is kind of urgent. Isshiki."

With a slight smile in response to how Yukinoshita was pressing her fingers against her temples, Hiratsuka-sensei walked into the room with great strides.

Then she walked next to Isshiki, crossed her arms and looked down at her.

"Work, huh?"

"Eh....."

Isshiki seemed to be at a loss for words, and she looked around her nervously. Then her suspicious gaze met mine.

"Didn't you say you were very free?"

"..... I am very free."

Hearing my question, Isshiki turned her face away, and replied me in a peevish tone.

Hearing that, Hiratsuka-sensei took a deep breath.

"Although the student council is indeed functioning as per normal, you still have other jobs to attend to. Didn't I tell you to think about the graduation ceremony farewell speech and pass it to me?"

Graduation ceremony..... Was it already that time? Isn't it held around the second week in the month of March? If so, then there's still plenty of time..... It seems that Isshiki thought so as well. [Ahaha, noooo~☆], she had that sort of cute smile on her face.

"But there, there's still another month....."

"Too naïve! If you neglect it, you are going to be so dead!"

Hearing Hiratsuka-sensei's stern tone, Isshiki shrugged her shoulders.

Indeed. One more month, don't just think that there's 'still' one more month.

Whether it was work or the summer holidays, if you keep thinking about how much time you have left, then for sure, in the next instant, all these 'excess' time that you thought you had will vanish.

Time and tide waits for no man. There's still hope, there's still hope, hope, hope, Tasmania devil!¹⁵ People who keep thinking that, will soon

¹⁵ Just Hikki fooling around with the word, 助かる (Tasukaru) Whole sentence (Romanized) is mada tasukaru mada tasukaru tasukaru tasumania debiru (Tasmanian Devil)

reach a truly hopeless situation. Such cases are definitely not in the minority.

"You can't really count February as a 'month'. Not only are the number of days lesser, but there's also the entrance exam. Hence, there will be so much to do. In short, there's just no time in February."

Hiratsuka-sensei said those words sharply.

"Yes! I will do it! I will do my best! I will think of something! That's why I am here to consult with them! I am here to hear about the situation in the previous year!"

Isshiki's answer was pretty spirited. That's really wonderful of her. However, what is that that you are saying? I am pretty sure that the contents of what you wanted to talk to us about was the obligatory chocolates.....

Although it didn't really matter either way, there wasn't anything more unreliable than the words "I will do my best" and "I will do something about it."

You can't believe anything of that sort when it's said by a corporate slave. The source is my father. Although this person would say something nice-sounding when he was discussing work on the phone at home, as soon as the call ended, he would be saying "Like hell that can be done, idiot!"

Of course, Hiratsuka-sensei saw through Isshiki's shallow response and as she combed her hair upwards, she looked at Isshiki with a frustrated expression.

"I am saying, you can't do it this way. Next year, you are going to have to be independent. You can't keep relying on your senpais, right?"

Hearing Hiratsuka-sensei's words, Yukinoshita continued to grip her tea cup as she nodded her head.

"Indeed."

"Un. Although it's quite a big thing to deal with....., but Isshiki-San is the president after all....."

Yuigahama too, was looking at Isshiki with a troubled smile.

Thereupon, as though seeking an ally, she moved her chair bit by bit. Then, with tears welling up in her eyes, she tugged lightly at my sleeves.

I am totally weak against people who used this sort of method to seek help.

Komachi would often shed tears for me to see over all sorts of things, I, as an elite class Onii-chan would stand unconditionally by my sister's side. I wouldn't even mind destroying one or two worlds for my sister's sake. Ah, as expected of me this Onii-sama.

Guess it can't be helped. Time for me to say something to wrap all these up..... As I was about to speak, I will interrupted by the sound of Yukinoshita's voice.

"Hikigaya-kun, you mustn't pamper her."

"Nothing like that, it's just that she is here to discuss something after all....."

Hearing me say that, Isshiki leaned herself forward.

"Exactly! Aren't you supposed to at least listen to someone who's here for a consultation?"

"But, Iroha-chan's case is slightly different from Yumiko and Saki....."

As Yuigahama troubled herself over this, Hiratsuka-sensei blinked her eyes in surprise.

“What, you mean there were others who came here too?”

“Yes! It’s just as you said! There were many people who came! So, I thought I would lend them my aid as well.....”

“That’s not your job.”

Hiratsuka-sensei swiftly rejected her excuses. To that, Isshiki had no response but to grind her teeth in vexation.

Isshiki, you are too naïve. Even if you tell her a decent reason, it would still be impossible for Hiratsuka-sensei to forgive you. As for why that is so, no matter how hard you try, Hiratsuka-sensei’s words will always be much more logical than yours. In any case, Isshiki herself was not ‘decent’ at all. A better word choice to describe her would be flat..... Well, not really. What she ought to have, was there, un. Flat would be referring to that somethingnoshita-san!

After all, people only adopt that sort of righteous tone when criticizing others. You are not supposed to use it when accepting criticisms. Therefore, the right thing for you to do would be to ignore her.

Let me show you how it’s done.....

"Well, the contents of what they are discussing is more relatable to girls, so it would be better if we had more girls discussing it. At least, that's what I think since I am not too sure about it. See, isn't it going to be Valentine's Day soon?"

Valentine's Day. As soon as I said that magic word, Hiratsuka-sensei froze on the spot. Then, she immediately cast her gaze outside the window, a faraway look in her eyes.

"Valentine's day, is it..... So nostalgic....."

Then, with a self-mocking sigh, Hiratsuka-sensei's gaze returned to us. Staring at us, she uttered "Valentine's day....." in a small voice once more.

Her eyes no longer contained the playful look of just now, but one of melancholy.

Hiratsuka-sensei cleared her throat lightly and readied herself.

"Since someone came to your with a request, I guess the matter with the farewell speech can wait a bit. You do need Isshiki to help you out every once in a while."

"Eh, not really, I don't really need Isshiki to help out with anything....."

"Isn't that just mean!?"

Isshiki turned to face me with a look of indignation. No, seriously, I think you will just make it worse..... As I tossed her a cold glare, Yuigahama began her intervention.

"Alright alright..... It's not really a bad idea. If she can lend a helping hand, we would have less to deal with....."

"Are you sure?"

"Senpai, what do you take me for....."

Ignoring Isshiki, I turned to look at Yukinoshita.

"If Yuigahama-san says as such, then I have no objections."

At this point, Hiratsuka-sensei clapped her hands together.

"Then it's decided. Isshiki will, to the best of her abilities, settle the farewell speech herself. Also, since everyone has beseeched you with a request, I think you all deserve some praise for all your performance up till this point in time."

"Isn't that just because they treat us as some handyman....."

It is indeed true that the number of people who came to us with requests has increased. Thanks to that, the amount of workload has also increased. The problem lies in the fact that we didn't get anything in return at all. It wasn't even on the level of being unpaid for overtime anymore.

What was this? Treating overtime as flexible working hours? Please, this was already like training us to dedicate ourselves to a black business.

Seeing my eyes convey this message in resentment, Hiratsuka-sensei winked at me.

"Even if so, you are still helping others. An existence whereby you are push yourself a little is very important. I think it's not a bad idea for Isshiki to possess this trait."

"Yes! I will continue to put in my best efforts!"

Although Isshiki replied with a lot of vigor, but it was obvious, that big smile of hers was saying "Noooo, extend the deadline~~"

".....My original intention was to correct some of your flaws. Anyway, just do your best."

With a bitter smile, Hiratsuka-sensei gently patted Isshiki's head lightly. Then, waving her hands slightly, she left the club room.

Watching her leave, we heaved a sigh of relief as well.

"But, it really is quite troubling."

Hearing Yukinoshita, who was now crossing her arms, murmur that; Isshiki, who had her arms crossed as well, looked serious as she sighed.

"Yes, Miura-Senpai showing her seriousness there is indeed a little troubling."

"What I meant was the amount of request....."

Laughing bitterly at the exchange between the two, Yuigahama began to speak.

"But then, I think I kind of understand how Hayato-kun is feeling....."

Hayama's feelings, no, I don't really understand him..... I looked at Yuigahama questioningly, asking her for the intention of that line. Yuigahama thought for a while, and then spoke once more.

"Ah, you see....., how should I put it.....as expected I still can't really say it openly, or maybe I just read too much into things....."

This sort of worry was really like her. Hearing her, Isshiki nodded her head

"Ah, that is so like Yui-Senpai. So kind."

"Is that, so....., ahaha..... Just like me, huh....."

Yuigahama laughed awkwardly at Isshiki's words, and had a slightly dejected look on her face.

She was probably shy from being praised. It's probably just that. Or rather, she was the same as Hayama Hayato. Because they were both

kind, they were probably suffering from being too concerned about others.

Thinking about it, Yuigahama was on very good things with Hayama, Miura as well as Isshiki. Her trouble with getting caught between the three of them had already surfaced during the ride to Destiny Land, and it was all the more obvious now.

'Ah, such a huge problem.....' It was very easy for an outsider to make such a comment. However, I was unable to do so.

I had a hard time understanding why someone would keep worrying about the relationships between others. However, I had the same feeling as her. That feeling of wanting to obtain a conclusion.

Probably, Yukinoshita felt the same way as well. I could tell from Yukinoshita's expression that she was quite concerned over Yuigahama's dark mood.

For example, if I could obtain the same conclusion as Hayama, then perhaps everything I have done up till now was a waste of effort.

Hayama Hayato, who has chosen to live up to everybody's expectation, has decided to fulfill it flawlessly. To undertake the greatest compromise without compromise. Dedicating himself to using such a measure to prolong such a life.

There was nothing as sincere as this insincerity.

For such a [kind] person, there wasn't much that an [unkind] person could do. The most they could do was to engage in monologue, or to repeat the same thing over and over again.

"..... Well, isn't it enough to just use an excuse? Some sort of official reason to convince Hayama."

“Huh?”

Isshiki seemed to have no idea what I was talking at all and the upper half of her body followed her head's movements and tilted to the side, whilst looking my way. Although this action of hers was very cute, but her answer was really annoying, Isshiki.....

“Just as long as you get him into a position whereby he's forced to accept it, or rather, whereby he can accept it naturally.”

Hearing my follow-up, the corners of Isshiki's mouth curled upwards, a queer expression that didn't really seem to suggest that she understood it completely. Then, Yukinoshita placed the tea cup and cup holder to one side and with her eyes, told me to be quiet.

“That is to say, it's fine as long as there is an excuse? If you were to give him in a closed environment, Hayama-kun wouldn't be troubled by it.”

“That's right, closed, that thing.”

Actually whether it was closed or worst or QP ¹⁶, it doesn't matter. The important point was that Hayama doesn't have to worry about how others looked at him, that all we needed to do was not damage his public image.

Though I have said so much, Isshiki and Yuigahama still did not seem to understand and remained tilting their heads. Yuigahama was still muttering “Cu-ro-se-to.....?” Erm, what exactly is a closet environment? Doraemon's living environment? ¹⁷

“For example..... Don't mention Valentine's Day, just get him to taste it. Something like that, I don't have an exact idea.”

¹⁶ A manga by Hiroshi Takahashi, QP (キューピー)

¹⁷ Doraemon lives in a closet.

"So it's like that..... would it okay for everyone to make (the chocolates) together?"

Yuigahama inhaled a deep breath as she spoke, her expression suggesting that she was quite relieved. Un, I think that it would be best if you understood it without much trouble.

"Well, something like that. Whether it's Isshiki or Miura, as long you made it with Hayama and get him to test its taste, that guy will have no way of rejecting you."

"I see..... I understand the gist of it now! I just have to drag him to a place whereby there are no one with interfere with us?"

"Although you aren't wrong, but please note how you saying it....."

Hearing me chiding Isshiki, Yukinoshita let slipped a chuckle.

"However, the main point is indeed as such. As expected of a genius who specializes in disappearing from the public eye and unfair tactics."

"Un, you need to take notice of how you speak too."

Sometimes, you do need to put further thought into how you extend your praise to others. As I thought that, Yuigahama slapped her thigh and stood up.

"Then, let's all do it. Us together, I mean....."

".....Indeed. If we could teach at the place as well, then there will be no need to suggest menus to each individual person too."

"Ah, isn't that great! To be able to doing an event together with those who came here with their requests, to learn from each other too. Also, if Yukinoshita-senpai would teach, then that would be really great."

Isshiki moved her chair closer and closer to Yukinoshita. She grabbed Yukinoshita's hand, who seemed to be thinking of something at the moment, and with a slight tilt of her head, looked at Yukinoshita in a pleading manner with upturned eyes. Then with an "ehehe", she smiled at her.

"E, eh eh..... I don't really mind....."

As always, Yukinoshita didn't have much resistance to skin ship and body touch. Throw in a sweet pleading voice, and Yukinoshita would fall for it, hook, line and sinker.

Although the difference between this gesture of hers and Yuigahama's was just like the difference between something natural and cultivated, the exceptional effectiveness that both had on Yukinoshita didn't seem to change.

Yukinoshita cleared her throat, and shot a glance at me.

"If it's help, I don't think there's much of a problem in providing it..... What do you think?"

"I can't really care, even if you ask me what I think..... The one's who's doing the teaching is you, so if you don't think you will be tired out from it, then it's alright."

Also, Yuigahama seemed to be really into it. Hence, it doesn't really matter even if I rejected it.

"Is that so? Then we have to think about the way in which this event could be held....."

Yukinoshita placed her hand underneath her chin and began to think. Isshiki, who was sitting to her side, suddenly picked up her phone and called someone.

"Ah, Vice-president? I need you to help me write a proposal. Something along the lines of a cooking class event. Something like that. Huh? No, just make something that I can put up on the noticeboard of a community center. Also."

Despite the obviously troubled voice that could be heard on the other end of the line, Isshiki tutted and began to give her instructions.

"Ne ne, Yukinon, what about me?"

Yuigahama too, shifted her chair closer and closer to Yukinoshita, asking her what she should do. Hearing that question, Yukinoshita thought for a little bit before replying.

"As for Yuigahama-San....."

Then, she placed her hand solemnly onto Yuigahama's shoulders, and began talking to her in a gentle voice as though talking to a small child.

"I will do it together with you."

"You don't trust me at all!? U u, then..... what would Hikki be doing?"

Though she turned her head all of a sudden and asked me that question, there was nothing that I could help her with regards to that.

"I have no experience with cooking or baking."

Hearing my answer, Yukinoshita gave a little chuckle.

"It doesn't matter. You just need to taste it and give us your opinion."

I think I have heard those words somewhere before. But the tone used back then and now was different. Yuigahama, who was sitting next to her seemed to have remembered something as well and let out a laugh.

"..... Leave it to me. I specialize in that field."

As I recalled the answer that I had given that time, I said as such. The three of us looked at one another, and broke into a hearty laugh.

Isshiki, who was still in the midst of her call glanced at the three of us, probably because she noticed our laughter.

Her gaze was asking us why were we laughing and to that, I answered by shaking my head, telling her it was nothing.

There is really no proper explanation for this sort of thing. There were some things whose importance could only be understood through the passage of time as well as the shared memories of it.

Isshiki shook her head lightly at my actions, and before long, finished her conversation with the Vice-President and ended up the call at long last.

"Okay, alright, yes, thanks for your trouble."

The Vice President on the other end seemed to be on the verge of tears, but Isshiki just ignored it and hung up the call. Having completed her call, she stood up, looking refreshed.

"Well, that settles it. The finer details will be settled by the student council, so I will leave the cooking room up to you~"

As she muttered "sorry for bothering you" in a small voice, she bowed to us and prepared to leave the club room.

She was probably going off to do some preparations for the cooking room or something like that.

That unreliability that had been present in the past no longer existed.

Although her way of doing things seemed to be a little high-handed, I did think that this also reflected her growth. No, it's a little extreme to call it growth. Well, I think it's more appropriate to say that she was just good at dealing with things. Also, the way that she treated the Vice President was practically the same way in which she treated Tobe.

"Well then, sorry to trouble you, Isshiki-san."

"Un! Do your best! Iroha-chan!"

Towards Isshiki who was bowing to us at the doorway, Yukinoshita smiled warmly at her whereas Yuigahama was pumping her hand into the air cheerfully. I nodded my head and watched her leave.

Watching her close the door quietly behind her, I had a sudden thought.

.....I see, because of how Isshiki was seriously doing this right now, I didn't have to do anything in particular.

Somehow, it feels a little lonely when I couldn't help out.

Chapter 3

[Surprisingly, the thing that Iroha's absence brought about was]

Although it was said that we needn't bother ourselves with the small things, but this was quite unsettling.

In truth, in the few days after that heated consultation as well as Isshiki's proposal, there was an unsettling air within the club room.

After school, coming to the club room, reading books, drinking red tea and the occasional tea-snack, and then suddenly glancing at the door. These few days passed just like that. Today was no different.

This uneasy feeling was like how one felt when they were going out to run an errand for the first time. Even up till now, there were tons of jobs being thoughtlessly pushed upon me. I felt anxious for Isshiki as to whether she could do her job properly without anyone's help.

Un, indeed. It must be that. It must be because of that something called paternal love.

If it wasn't that, I would begin to suspect myself on whether I was actually a workaholic and get myself into an identity crisis.

Since always, whenever we accepted a request or a consultation, I would immediately plunge myself into the job, but this time was slightly different.

If I had to put it in words, it was akin to accepting a job that had vague descriptions, but one where you knew the deadline or the due date for it clearly. A feeling whereby living was akin to dying.

Moreover, the person who was entrusted that task was Isshiki Iroha, who would be spurred on by that sense of unease.

[What am I going to do from now now!?] I had this sort of feeling that was typical of a protagonist from a Magical Girl series as I thought about it and sighed deeply. Then, I could hear a sigh as well coming from across me.

Looking up, I saw Yukinoshita had looked up from her book, and was now looking at the door.

It seems like, she has the same feelings of fear as me. Ah, don't tell me she has fallen in love with Isshiki? Iroyuki, that would work!

Thinking of this, I suddenly heard the sound of laughter coming from Yuigahama.

"Since just now, you two have been staring at the door for quite awhile."

She said it with a wry smile.

"If it's about Iroha-chan, I don't think you two have to worry so much."

"I am not worrying about Isshiki."

"No one was talking about Isshiki-San."

Both of us replied her at about the same time.

All of a sudden, Yukinoshita turned her face away.

The truth is that I, and I fear, Yukinoshita as well, was embarrassed that Yuigahama had seen through us that we both cared very much about Isshiki, and as such, could not help but spout those hateful words.

And then, as though seeing right through those hateful words as well, Yuigahama had a teasing grin on her face.

"Really?"

"Really."

Yukinoshita, whose expression was spied upon by Yuigahama, suddenly twisted her whole body to the side this time. Her cheeks and the tips of her ears that poked through her hair were a visible tinge of red. Seeing this, Yuigahama sighed lightly in happiness.

If she was satisfied by this then it would be great, but she was now glancing in my direction, and with a 'Mmmmm', tilted her head, a complicated expression on her face.

"Hm? But, Hikki, is very kind towards Iroha-chan."

"Indeed. Pampering her too much in fact. Even I think it's a bit too much as well."

After listening to Yuigahama, Yukinoshita stared daggers at me. Hey, wait a moment, don't just change your target to me all of a sudden?

"It's nothing like that....."

Hearing my answer, both Yuigahama and Yukinoshita stared at me suspiciously. No, why aren't you two saying anything.....

No seriously, it's nothing like that at all! I didn't know why I felt like I was finding some sort of excuse, I cleared my throat and began to explain once more.

"In the case of Isshiki, I am just worried when she would just throw everything to me, that's all. It will be a huge bother if that sort of helpless situation comes about. Hence, I thought it would be more effective if I were to help out from the start."

As I spoke, even I felt that the words that came out of my mouth at the spur of the moment had hit on the heart of the matter. No, because those words were spoken on the spur of the moment, they were definitely the truth.

That was my bad habit.

Unable to entrust anyone with anything, that was tantamount to not having any sort of trust in them.

Towards this sort of person, how was it possible to understand and rely on them. Needless to say, it was all the more impossible to see the truth behind such a scary existence that thrived on reliance.

Seriously, who would be worried about that sort of person. There was a limit to how absurd something could be.

I thought back to those words exchanged in that cafe where the cold wind blew about us. Was there really anyone who could answer that question?

Thinking about it, my mouth stopped talking, and an inevitable silence resulted from that. Noticing that, I quickly added on something to make up for that lapse.

"Hence, instead of saying that I am worried about Isshiki, it would be more appropriate to say that I am worried about my future. I feel all uneasy when I think about how I am going to be stuck doing work."

"What you just said made me worry even more for your future....."

Yukinoshita pressed her temples and let out a deep sigh.

"Well, that answer was very much like what Hikki would say."

Yuigahama replied with a bitter smile, an uncomfortable and troubled look on her face.

Well, actually, Yukinoshita and I weren't actually that kind towards Isshiki.

Because you trust someone, you would entrust it to them. Using this as a gauge, the one that was kind to Isshiki was probably only Yuigahama.

Assessing Isshiki properly, we wouldn't be worrying about her or leading a helping hand unnecessarily.

This point alone was more than enough to distinguish us from Yuigahama.

Come to think about it, what about Yukinoshita..... She had already revealed that she was super weak against pestering kouhais who

engaged in skinship to Isshiki..... Thinking of this, I couldn't help but point this out. I glowered at her accusingly.

"If you were talking about pampering her, then you are quite close to doing that as well."

"Me? I think I treated her fairly strictly."

Yukinoshita cocked her head and looked at us blankly. Yuigahama who was watching on from the side seemed to have guessed at what I wanted to say, crossed her arms and began to groan.

"Uunn..... That is exactly what gives people the feeling that you are actually kind. After all, Yukinon enjoys taking care of people."

As expected of Gahama, this was totally like Gahama-San. She was as understanding as always.

"That's right. Yuigahama often gets taken care of as well."

"EH?! Noth, nothing like that at all! I have never given her that sort of trouble, probably! Nothing like that!"

Yuigahama had leapt to her feet, and seemed ready to argue vehemently about what I had just said, her face a look of strong objection. However, this was interrupted by Yukinoshita's smile.

"Ara, have you no self-awareness?"

"I am not lacking in self- self-awareness....."

Seeing her sweet smile, Yuigahama's face was flushed a deep red and she faltered in her speech, and sat back down dejectedly. Then, she corrected her sitting posture, and even her hands were placed gracefully on her knees.

Un, self-awareness. It's very important.

However, the way in which Yukinoshita looked after Yuigahama and Isshiki were slightly different.

In the case of Yuigahama, it could be said that she was at the mercy of Yuigahama, or perhaps pampering her unconditionally. Towards Isshiki, i had the impression that she was simply more inclined to take the initiative and help her. There was a sense of distance between them, or it could be said that she had realized her position as a Senpai and used that as a basis for all her words to Isshiki.

If we were to say that the closeness between Yukinoshita and Yuigahama was akin to that of a kitten and puppy, then the closeness between Yukinoshita and Isshiki was that of a mother cat and her kitten. No, rather than say that Isshiki was like a kitten, I felt that her real nature was that of a stoat with its own ferocity and indomitability.

.....Well, I think that Yukinoshita often gets taken care of as well, so both are to blame.

Ah anyway, it's a good thing for beautiful girls to have a good relationship between them, un.

Put it another way, beautiful girls quarreling with each other were seriously scary.....

Those like Miura or Kawasaki, whose intensity were strong enough to make people cower in fear and wet themselves. I would say that they were turning into the people of the planet Chiburu. ¹⁸Like hell they would.

Anyway, the relationship between the Service Club and Isshiki could be said to be pretty decent.

¹⁸ http://ultra.wikia.com/wiki/Alien_Chibu Because Chibu and Chibi sounds almost identical.

As I was thinking of this, Yuigahama seemed to have understood something and nodded her head.

"Well, but maybe Iroha-chan does like being taken care of. That part of her is really cute of her....."

She sprawled herself on the table lazily all of a sudden and murmured that at the end.

Well, Yuigahama was surprisingly reliable at times, and I don't recall her voluntarily relying on others as well.

Looking at her, she seemed just like Isshiki, but those two were actually polar opposites.

Hence, she may actually be envious of Isshiki.

However, one Isshiki was more than enough.

If there existed two of such a person, it would be a big problem. If Yuigahama was going to become like Isshiki, that was a little-, there was some good to that but this was already fine, or maybe this was better..... Un..... I have a feeling that this was going to turn into some long and nonsensical bullshit if I continue on. And so, I coughed and cleared my throat and swallowed the rest of what I wanted to say. (Coconut flavor)

Towards that extremely unnatural cough, Yuigahama remained sprawled on the table and slowly turned her head backwards.

Her hair flowed towards the back from that bun of hair, and her fringe fell gently forward. Her eyes peeked out from within the tiny gaps in the hair. Her mouth opened a little, and her lips trembled slightly, a charming sight.

Looking up from below, her gaze captured mine and whatever I had prepared to say disappeared immediately.

"Erm, to call that bit of Isshiki cute is a little..., it's not as though that alone is enough to be labelled cute....."

As I said it, I became so embarrassed that I started scratching my head, and lowered my head to look at a page of my book that I had yet to read.

What I spoke was completely incoherent, it's meaning completely unclear. If I had known that this would happen, I should've just shut my mouth.....

At least, those were my thoughts. I heard a small chuckle. Looking at the source, I saw that Yuigahama had sat up and was smiling at me.

".....Un, so it's like that."

Thanks to her reply, I was able to calm myself down a little. And so, I continue to speak in a normal manner.

"Also, there are kind Onee-sans here who are willing to help her out with this and that, so she's pretty pleased with that. Recently, she even comes here earlier than me."

With that said, Yukinoshita placed her hand at the edge of her mouth and looked sullen.

"I am not sure if she's pleased with that. Though I hope that she would give us a notice if she's coming here. My supply of red tea is dropping pretty quickly and I do have to prepare more tea snacks as well. Furthermore, the time where I get to read my books in peace and quiet is decreasing as well."

With an exaggerated "Haaaa", she sighed. Although it was clear that she was complaining in what she said, the corners of her mouth slackened gently, as though she was pretty happy.

To give an example, it would be like how a foul tempered grandma would be mesmerized by her grandma..... 'Buying a bed for the cat to sleep but yet it chooses to sleep in the cardboard box, that kid, seriously.", that sort of tone.

When Yukinoshita and Isshiki were alone together, that sort of scene, one can imagine how that scene would be.

Pretending to not care about Isshiki, but then going out of the way to pour some tea for her, then going around to help her with this and that. So, when Isshiki was grinning broadly and had said she wanted to celebrate, at the bottom of her heart, she had already relaxed her guard around Yukinoshita. Whoa, this sure escalated quickly. Iroyuki, that could work.

Yuigahama stared at her blankly, watching Yukinoshita spout stuff about Isshiki in between breaths.

Then, she uttered a few words.

"Maybe I should come here a little earlier as well....."

From the way she spoke, I thought I detected a sense of envy in it. Hearing her, Yukinoshita raised her eyebrows and looked at her accusingly.

"..... This is more or less a proper club activity. Coming here a little earlier should be natural, no?"

"Ah, un, but I would somehow start chatting with Yumiko and end up coming late."

Yuigahama chuckled sheepishly to smooth things over and at the same time, played with the bun of hair on her. However, Yukinoshita did not seem to find it funny at all.

".....I see."

With that short answer. Her gaze fell silently and slowly back to the book in my hands.

By the looks of it, she seemed to be sulking. Well, what she said could be interpreted as prioritizing Miura over her. She sure does get jealous. today's club room was as peaceful as always.

Well, if even I could see that (she was jealous), it was not possible that Yuigahama could not figure this out. Yuigahama corrected her posture and shifted her chair a little.

"However, if you really want it, I could just come much earlier. The three of us just relaxing here, I kind of like it..... No, I mean, I really love it."

Because she was closer than just now, her words seemed to have a easier time reaching Yukinoshita. Sighing lightly, Yukinoshita glanced at Yuigahama's expression. Well, there's really nothing to be gained from looking at her expression.

Both of their expressions were not that much different from one another.

Their expression, a little bit of embarrassment, and their downward gaze as well as their cheeks which were gradually dyed red, were a complete match.

"..... Red tea, let me brew another kettle."

"Ah, really? Then, let me take out some new snacks!"

Saying that, Yuigahama began rummaging about in her bag.

Un, well, those snacks were pretty much eaten by you only..... What you really like, are snacks..... I somehow couldn't bring myself to say those sort of detestable words.

In place of those, I sighed in between my smiles.

"Hikigaya-kun."

"Ah ah, sorry to trouble you."

Hearing my name called, with the tea cup in hand, I extended my hand towards her.

The warm air rising from it, as well as the fragrance of the red tea, and then with the addition of the sweet fragrance of the cookies.

"Here, Hikki."

"Oh oh, thank you."

The plate of snacks was pushed in front of me. I took one from it and placed it in my mouth. Then, as i exclaimed how hot it was, I took small sips from the warm red tea, and at last, exhaled a long hot breath.

Each of us being different from each other. When our breaths overlapped with one another, our eyes crossed one another.

Yet, however.

Especially at this sort of moment, there would be a visitor.

Just as I had anticipated, there was a series of light knocks on the door. Following Yukinoshita's reply of "please come in", that visitor opened the door slowly.

"Sorry for making you all wait!"

Saying that, Isshiki Iroha has arrived at the club room at long last.

X X X

As Yukinoshita was preparing a new cup of red tea, Isshiki handed a few print outs to us.

"This are some of the many things that we have decided on. I will be doing the explanations on all of these."

"Okay. Please."

As Yukinoshita answered her, she poured some red tea into a paper cup. Then, she added two sticks of sugar. Thereupon, Isshiki gave her thanks and took it from her calmly.

.....Oh, Yukinoshita's concern for her was amazing, but Isshiki was just as amazing for being trained to this standard.

"Anyway, about the schedule and the place....."

Ignoring my surprise, Isshiki began her explanations. At the same time that she spoke, I began to read the print out that I was given.

All of a sudden, my eyes stopped at the date of the event.

"It isn't held on Valentine's Day?"

She had wanted to give chocolates to Hayama Hayato through any means, and so I had willfully decided that she would definitely hold the event on that day.

But contrary to my expectations, it was held several days before that. It seems as though Yukinoshita had realized this as well, and she removed her gaze from the print out and looked in my direction.

"Because there is an entrance exam on that day, so you couldn't get a teacher to supervise the event?"

"Ah, yes. Also, on that day, it's a school holiday."

Isshiki nodded her head in reply to Yuigahama who had muttered a "Oh" after she was convinced by the answer.

"Well, that would be one of the reasons. There are also those who have plans on that day, and so with consideration of the participation rate, I thought it would be more considerate towards everyone if we held it before the day itself."

"I see."

What a perfectly believable reason.

If there was going to be an entrance exam on Valentine's Day, I would definitely be praying for Komachi's success in the exams the whole day. Not only that, I would even be doing scapulimancy, drawing fortunes, and even subjecting myself to a trial by the gods. ¹⁹Actually no, I definitely won't be subjecting myself to the latter.

Because my entire head was preoccupied with Komachi, I already felt that the event wasn't even important anymore.

If the entrance exam fell on Valentine's Day, which meant that Komachi definitely wouldn't prepare any chocolates..... I mean, if I saw her making those love-filled chocolates throughout the night just before her exams, I would be so mad that I would hit her. After hitting her, I would go and gently hug her.....

¹⁹ An ancient practice by the Japanese, whereby (usually) you plunge your hand into boiling water, and if you are innocent, you escape unscathed.

Ah ah, Komachi chocolate, abbreviated Komachoco, is getting further and further from me.....

As I lamented this fact, Isshiki continued her explanation solemnly.

"Yukinoshita Senpai, can you reach the place around 1700? Senpai and Yui-Senpai can come a little later."

"I don't mind."

"We will go together with Yukinon. Right, Hikki?"

Yuigahama's voice came to me from a distant place.

"Ah, I don't really care anymore."

If I couldn't get Komachi's chocolate, then nothing else matters anymore..... With a rustling, my mood turned into dust and ash and vanished. Just like ARMS whose nucleus was smashed into pieces.²⁰

Well, to me, Komachi was like my nucleus, there's no helping it.

Resting my back against the chair, I was burnt to a pure white color, and felt a cold glare coming from Isshiki, who was seated diagonally opposite me.

"You seem like you have been neglected which makes me really curious."

When Isshiki was done saying that, Yuigahama burst out laughing as though saying "It's nothing."

"Well, whenever Hikki has that look, the reason is downright obvious so there's nothing to worry about."

²⁰ Should be a reference to God Eaters Burst

"Indeed, I can more or less guess the reason. There's no need to worry about so let's just let him be."

"Oh, that so.....?"

Towards Yukinoshita's look of disgust, Isshiki replied her nonchalantly.

Isshiki continued her explanations.

"The materials and utensils will be gathered by the student council so there's no issue on that front. Aprons and stuff like that are quite troublesome so I think that people will have to prepare those themselves."

With her hand supporting her jaw, Yukinoshita who had been listening attentively all this while looked up all of a sudden.

"That sounds about alright. Could you let me take a look at the utensils list later? I want to confirm the details to ensure that nothing has been left out."

"Most certainly!"

Isshiki's reply was a little strange, I wasn't sure whether she really understood what Yukinoshita had meant. Then she began to write some notes down on her own print out. When that was done, she spun the pen round and round as though it was some magic wand, and glanced at Yuigahama.

"That's about it for the communication portion. Ehh, could you please help me to contact Miura-Senpai and Ebina-Senpai as well? I actually have no idea how to contact them."

"Okay, I understand."

Yuigahama answered coolly, but I was momentarily stunned.

Oh, oh..... I think I just caught a whiff of how complicated a female's society could get, could you girls not..... Chatting away so happily with one another when meeting with one another, yet not even having each other's contact, it was a little scary.....

I mean, the scary part about girls lies in the fact that despite their relationship not being good, and maybe even if they weren't friends at all, you would totally be unable to discern this from the way they converse.....

.....No, it was quite obvious that Isshiki and Miura were not really on good terms on each other just by observation only. At best, their relationship could only be considered normal. As expected of Ashi-San, I really hate how crooked you are! ²¹

"And, and also..... That Kawa....., Kawa....., that somewhat scary Senpai, could someone please contact her?"

"Un, I will contact Saki."

Yuigahama replied coolly, but I was momentarily stunned.

Oh, oh..... Likewise, Isshiki too can't remember her name..... As expected of Kawasomething-San. However, please don't ever mention this in front of her, Irohasu! Don't hit my face! Don't hit my body either! ²²

"That settles the problems with the contacts." Isshiki said it as she checked her print out once more. Then with a sudden, "Ah, that's right", she began to add on to her previous statement.

"If you al wanted to invite someone else, please notify us beforehand. We have to do some readjustment according to the number!"

²¹ Ashi-san refers to Miura. Nickname given to her by fans because of how of the unique way she addresses herself in the first person as "A-shi" You can go watch the anime again to hear it.

²² Refers to Junko Mihara's famous line in 1979, 3 年 B 組金八先生 as 山田麗子(Reiko Yamada)

"Ah, so we can invite others as well."

"Yes. Hmm, it seems that Tobe-Senpai is coming even though I didn't invite him."

Somehow, it seems that Isshiki was saying that with a exceptional amount of scorn. You, are really cruel towards Tobe. You can definitely get along well with me.

"Ah, did you hear that from Yumiko or Hayato....."

Yuigahama gave a troubled laugh. However, Tobe was going to come to the event. Well, if Tobe was going to come to an all-girls event, Hayama could feel more at ease, and make it easier for him to come as well. He was an unexpectedly considerate person, he probably rushed to join the event after hearing about it from someone else. Tobe, he was a good guy even though he was annoying.....

As I thought this, a few words appeared suddenly in my mind.

Tobe, man, woman, Hayama, ... I can call others as well?

That is to say, diligently putting together all the pieces so far, soon, an image began to form.

In short.

That is to say.

..... I could invite Totsuka?

"Alright, leave it to me!"

The instant I had my answer, I shouted out. To this, Isshiki shoulders jumped in shock and then, looked at me timidly and drew away from me as she looked in my direction.

"Why the sudden gusto....."

When Isshiki was done saying that, Yuigahama burst out laughing as though saying "It's nothing."

"Well, whenever Hikki has that look, the reason is downright obvious so there's nothing to worry about."

"Indeed, I can more or less guess the reason. There's no need to worry about so let's just let him be."

"Oh, that so.....?"

Towards Yukinoshita's look of disgust, Isshiki replied her nonchalantly.

Ah, it's great that you two are able to understand so quickly. I mean, they had both already given up on me.....

"Yukinoshita-Senpai, I wish to consult you about the menu. I feel that we should prepare a few choices in advance, otherwise there's no way we can preorder it~"

Isshiki had already completely ignored me, and as she spoke, she started to take out multiple of what seemed like confection-making textbooks from her bag and tossed them onto the table. Yukinoshita nodded her head in approval at this and from the stack, took one out and began to read it page by page.

"There are so many to choose from, which would be the best..... Chocolate gateau or Sachertorte, or maybe chocolate truffle..... Cookies are a possible option as well. All the same, we can't only have chocolate

on the menu. There will be beginners there as well, so we have to take into consideration the difficulty level too....."

As Yukinoshita pondered over this frustratedly, she turned another page of the book. Indeed, even though it was chocolate-flavored snacks, there were still many types of it.

Regarding this, I wasn't too sure about the details, so I shan't comment much on it. Just how unsure was I? I was one of those who would pretend to know what a Sachertorte is by calling it a Sacherotote.²³

However, there will always be those fearless people who choose to speak without having any knowledge of the matter. Yuigahama was such a person.

Right now, Yuigahama had her hands raised high in the air, and as though unable to wait for her name to be called, leaned her body forward and began to speak.

"Ah! Something like chocolate fondue! Seems as fun as a chocopa!"

"Cho, copa.....? Eh, what?"

Probably because this was her first time hearing such a word, Yukinoshita tilted her head in bewilderment. Well, according to my deductions from everything that Yuigahama has ever said till now, chocopa could either refer be an abbreviation for a chocolate party or a party for making chocolate fondue. I was close to reaching the 2nd level of the Gahama language. I could probably score a high mark in the YUEIC.²⁴

Yukinoshita was still confused at this point, but Isshiki nodded her head with a "Ohh", seemingly relieved.

²³ From EP2 of Ore Monogatari!

²⁴ The YU comes from Yui's name. YUEIC is a parody of TOEIC, a basic English language proficiency test.

“Well, I guess everyone can have fun playing together~. This sort of event is possible.”

Is possible..... But, that. Takopa or hotpotpa or currypa, those people that could turn all sorts of things into a party, are really party people, who on a daily basis, go juicy party yeah! ²⁵

“But, because it’s an event held in the cooking room so.....”

Although it was a little difficult to bring herself to say it, she still managed to make a cross with her fingers. Yuigahama saw it and hung her head dejectedly.

Then, Yukinoshita who have been watching those two nodded her head.

“If that’s the case, then I think it’s still better to teach some common food items..... Something that’s quite pretty and also simple.....”

Yukinoshita who had been speedily browsing through the textbook suddenly stopped her gaze at a particular portion. It looked to be an advertisement page, and some new products were being advertised on it.

“They are selling a complete kit here..... And there’s no need for measurement as well, seems pretty simple to use too.”

“Ah, if that’s the case, then I think I can do that.”

The instant Yuigahama said that, words just wouldn’t come out of me. No, you, what, are you saying.....

“.....”

“Don’t just keep quiet!”

²⁵ Unique greeting for voice actress Chiaki Takahashi.

My silence and Yuigahama's cries of anguish overlapped with one another. As soon as that voice died down, an extremely kind voice gently sounded out. Yukinoshita patted Yuigahama's shoulders gently and kindly.

"Yuigahama-san, I think that it would be better for you to put your efforts in the wrapping, don't you think so?"

"Don't worry about me!"

Then, came the sound of Yuigahama's cries of 'Uwaaa'. No, the wrapping was very important, you know? For example, using a blue string as a decoration and wrapping it around your chest was bound to make you the subject of everyone's conversation, guaranteed to make you popular! ²⁶

As I thought so, Isshiki sighed lightly.

"Haa, but the taste won't change regardless of the packaging. If you were to look at it from a distance, you can't really tell the difference anyway..... Anyway, because it's for an event, so there's no need for any sort of packaging."

"Well, the price of providing the materials for the packaging is expensive anyway."

"Yes. Well, there's still a need to more or less recover the cost price through the entry fee, so the cheaper, the better."

".....Eh, we are collecting entry fees?"

The tone of my voice distinctly carried some emotion in it. Then, I extended my face. Seeing my expression, Isshiki let out a cry of 'Uwa' and drew away from me.

²⁶ Danmachi: Hestia

“Senpai, your face is really detestable right now..... It’s just a few hundred yen. Anyway, for you senpais, it will be free, since you all have been a great help.”

“That’s great.....’

“Yes, if there’s the collection of entry fees, then the budget could probably allow for more things..... First, can you tell me the budget? Using this as a basis, we can come up with a few lists of ingredients that will serve as a future reference and estimate.”

“Okay, please.”

Then, she took out another piece of paper from her clear folder. It appeared to be a trial balance sheet for this event. After looking through it, Yukinoshita began to examine the few candidates for the menu once more.

However, the details of the request given to us were kind of difficult to fulfill.

We were in for a rough time trying to complete it, but that couldn’t be helped at all.

The thing most suited for obligatory chocolates. Something that one could give to a romantic interest without feeling shy or embarrassed. Something that once learnt, would be convenient in the future as well as something that would interest a child who was making it.

Then, an even more difficult criteria to fulfill was, that something that Yukinoshita had been muttering away incoherently since just now.

“Something that even Yuigahama-san can make..... Something that even Yuigahama-san can make.....”

“That’s too much, Yukinon!”

Yuigahama, who had begun wailing, had begun to move closer to Yukinoshita. Then, despite being bothered by how Yuigahama was now hugging her, continued to flip the pages of the cooking book.

After a while, she seemed to have gotten an idea of what are the potential candidates, and began to note down the ingredients needed as well as the amount. All this while, Yuigahama remained hugging her, and took a peek from under her arms.

Then, Yuigahama laughed happily.

Yukinoshita, who seemed to think that Yuigahama was laughing at her, looked at her with displeasure.

“.....What’s the problem?”

“Ah, nothing at all..... I just thought that, this is so nostalgic.”

Yuigahama had at first tried to wave her hands hurriedly to try and smooth things over, but as she lowered her hands gently, she said those words in a mellow tone. Her eyes seemed to sparkle as she looked at Yukinoshita.

As to what she felt nostalgic about, I knew the answer. Maybe Yukinoshita too.

“.....Indeed.”

Yukinoshita answered simply. However, her gaze in response, continued to capture Yuigahama in her pupils long after she was done talking.

After a while, Yuigahama chuckled sheepishly, and deliberately shifted her chair to get closer to Yukinoshita. In the end, the two ended up sitting next to each other, directly opposite me.

“.....Isn't it?”

Then, as though she was confirming something, she spoke that in a soft voice. Looking at her tilt her head, looking my way with a faraway look in her eyes; I couldn't help but break into a smile at that cherubic expression of hers.

“I guess so.”

I replied just as simply, and shifted my gaze away.

One year has clearly not past, yet, why did that feel like it had happened such a long time ago, that it could evoke such nostalgic feelings. In that room where everything has yet to begin, in that instant in time where everything started to move.

“Iroha-chan, thank you.”

“Eh, ah, yes, erm no, ... you're, you're welcome?”

Having been suddenly thanked by Yuigahama, Isshiki seemed to be at a loss, and tilted her head to one side. Was it because this action was so comical that Yuigahama started to giggle? Then, after stopping her giggling fit, she sighed contentedly.

“Although this year is about to come to a close, I am glad that there's such a fun event near the end.”

“Although this year hasn't started for long.”

“To be more precise, this school year.”

Yukinoshita and I spoke unanimously, to which Yuigahama puffed out her cheeks.

Even Iroha too was taken aback by us and muttered “Uwa, the two of them are so nitpicky.”

But thinking that this exchange of words between us signaled the end of the conversation, she gazed at us and sighed a long breath, said, “Let’s call it a day,” and stood up.

“Thank you for the tea. Then, sorry for the trouble.”

“A, un. Thank you in advance for the help you will render on the actual day itself.”

“Then, see you again. I will do my best to come up with an estimation.”

Hearing both Yuigahama and Yukinoshita’s parting words, Isshiki bowed and left the room.

Just like that, the three of us was left behind. The feeling of nostalgic that stuck us now was even more real than what we had felt previously.

However, this nostalgia that we felt, it was probably because a lot of things have changed since then. It was also probably because somewhere, sometime, we have lost our identity. Perhaps, it was because we knew that it was no longer possible to obtain the same thing once more.

That’s why, it was nostalgic.

If it did indeed begin to change, then, surely, there will be a day where everything come to an end.

Yuigahama, who was smiling so purely, as well as Yukinoshita who was looking at her. The two of them were engaging in empty conversations.

Although it was just this sight, yet strangely enough, I felt so contented.

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A bath in winter always tended to be long.

I unintentionally became totally immersed in the bathing atmosphere, and sighed deeply. Was that because of the gloomy feeling I felt as I cycled home on the long path?

I climbed out of the bath just as I felt I was about to faint from having immersed myself in it for so long, and quickly tunneled myself into the kotatsu so as to not catch a cold and lay down.

The things that I didn't think about just now once more floated in front of my eyes, and my feet felt light.

Because of that, I rolled about, and then felt myself kick against a soft fur ball thing.

And so, our beloved cat Komakura wiggled itself out from underneath the kotatsu. With a look of disgust, it glared at me once and begin to prim its fur.

After a while, it pricked up its ears as though detecting something, and turned it face towards the door.

At about the same instant, came the sound of the door opening.

"I am back~"

"Oh, welcome back."

Komachi placed her bag down and prepared to take off her coat, when Komakura came over and rubbed itself against her feet, indicating that it wanted to be hugged.

“Ah, I can’t. Your fur will cling to my school uniform.”

Komachi sidestepped Komakura smoothly and I picked up Komakura to hug it as her substitute. Look at you, I am here to take care of you so don’t go and disturb Komachi who is most likely tired after a long day.

Then, as though detecting my intentions, Komakura begun to kick up a fuss in my arms. Seriously, this cat really can’t be considerate for others.

I mean, Komakura-san, do you really being hugged by me so much, why are you trying to push my face away with your paws.....

I looked at Komachi as Komakura continued to press its paws on my face, and I saw that Komachi was now balancing herself on one foot, trying to remove her high socks.

Although the heater was switched on, your feet is going to be cold. Girls really shouldn’t let their bodies be cold. Looking at her with a mother-like gaze, she seemed to have noticed me looking at her, and cocked her head, looked at me questioningly.

“Ah, Komachi, come and have your bath, the water is ready.”

“That so. Ah, but, I have just refilled it and heated it, so the water is boiling now.”

“Un, that’s why Komachi, go have your bath.”

“No, that’s why I said that the water is boiling now.”

“Un, that’s why-“

Komachi kept repeating the same thing over and over again.

.....Wait? What? Looking at her accusingly, Komachi waved her hands back and forth.

“No no no, I am definitely not going to enter a bath that Oni-cha has just used. Just think, there’s Oni-chan’s body fluids in there. No way no way.”

“Don’t treat me as though I am a pig bone?”

Would Wakame-chan say the same thing to Katsuo-kun one day as well..... I think that the bath water left behind by the Isono family would be very tasty. ²⁷

I mean, why did this girl keep replacing the water that I had bathed in. Wasn’t this treatment a little bit overboard? I mean, I always enjoyed Komachi’s fluids every time after she has had her bath..... It’s of course natural if you find that disgusting, un.

However, as compared to how she been nicknamed the smart and cute Komachica when she was young, the Komachi-chan of today was so different, probably because she has hit puberty.....²⁸

My tears flowed on its own accord as I was touched by my sister’s growth. The corners of Komachi’s eyes had something shiny there too as well. ‘No way, did Komachi feel the same too?’ I thought as such, and then, I heard a yawning noise.

“Then, Komachi is off to take her bath.”

“Ah ah, go slowly and don’t fall asleep in the bath.”

“Okay~”

Her reply too was interspersed with the sound of sounding. Seemed like she was really tired.

²⁷ Reference to an ancient comic strip Sazae-san. Wakame and Katsuo are siblings.

²⁸ Chica is Spanish for female.

Well, there were only a few days left to her entrance exam.

The things that I could help her out was to not bath before Komachi, as well as to offer my prayers. Also, I could also help her warm her blanket and shoes. Uh-oh, I am going to hated again. If this was in the Sengoku period, I would've had led a successful life.

Seems like this wasn't the time to talk about Valentine's Day.....

I think it would be better if I didn't tell Komachi about the event. There wasn't a need to trouble her or cause her regret. After all, she was already up to her neck in work preparing for the entrance exams. When the exams were all over, I was going to reward her magnificently.

That's why, I will try my best to not give any problems to Komachi. I won't bother her or let her be worried!

Komachi is doing her best by herself, so I won't get in her way.

Using your own strength and your own will was one of the steps of growing up. Learning to crawl by yourself, walking by yourself, then understanding for the first time what it means to walk together with another person.

Gradually going further and further away from this brother, Komachi will gradually become an adult. So lonely, so lonely..... As I thought these thoughts, I felt all the more lonely, and I began to have mixed feelings.

Because I was overly lonely, I suddenly plunged my head into Komakura's fur, who was sitting on my arm.

Aha..... When can I get Komachi's chocolate..... I really want to be able to keep getting chocolate from Komachi throughout my entire life.

Whether it was friendship chocolates or homo-chocolates, it doesn't really matter anymore. All I want was Komachoco.

..... Make me a Komachoco, please?

Chapter 4

[And so, the joys and worries of the guys have begun. (Girls are included too)]

A few days have passed since that hectic consultation.

During this period of time, the Service club did not do anything in particular. All we did were to give a few advice here and there to Isshiki who came by from time to time.

On the other hand, Isshiki herself seemed to be carrying out her work diligently. Even when school has ended, of the several occasions that I saw her, most of the time she was rushing here and there from place to place.

Incidentally, the vice-president would also be carrying a large stack of documents, looking downcast. Also, I would frequently catch a glimpse of Secretary-chan urging him. "Who do you think I am, give me some work to do vice-pres." Hello everyone, I am someone who generally treats all guys harshly.

Anyway, since today was the actual day of the event, all the members of the student council were busy working as usual. It was totally different from the Christmas event back then.

A great deal of noise could be heard coming from the community center near the train station. Although it was still early, but at any rate, coming here today was to help them out. And no, I am not talking about myself, I was referring to Yukinoshita.

Therefore, I am going to take my time going to you, community center. Although I had already come here once during Christmas, nothing much would have changed in this short period of time.

Parking my bike at the nearby carpark, the three of us walked together to the community center with a feeling of familiarity of the place.

I could see the members of the student council bustling here and there, following Isshiki's lead in preparing for the event.

Just as we were looking at the scene from the door, Isshiki noticed us and walked briskly over to us. She was hugging a bundle of paper with stuff written on them.

"Ah, senpai. You are really early."

"Yup."

Following that simple greeting, Yukinoshita and Yuigahama, who were behind me showed their faces as well.

"Hello, Isshiki-san."

"Yahello~! Is there anything we can help with?"

Hearing Yuigahama's question, Isshiki cocked her head as she tried to think of something.

"Hmmm. Ah, this, help me to stick this up. Just paste it at the entranceway, I will leave the finer details to you."

Saying that, Isshiki passed us a giant B2-sized paper that looked like it was made in a hurry. Well, although it's supposed to be a poster, it really just looked as though someone had used a multi-colored pen to write some stuff on it. Apart from the information written on it, someone had also drawn some graffiti-like illustrations, such as hearts,

or chocolates or emoticons, on the paper. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that a gigantic hand had written pop-up letters on it.

Even though the poster appeared to be done in great haste, it didn't look that bad overall.

The problem was the content written on the poster.

[People with no experience are welcome! No quota! An 'at home' atmosphere! Useful know-how for the future!]

This, no matter how I looked at it, it looked more like an advert for a black company..... 'At home' atmosphere, this way of putting things gives off the impression that it was going to be an extremely harsh place with the exception of one's family. (TL: Because 'at home' -> your family)

"If you just want to get the posters pasted, it's ok to leave the job to us."

Yukinoshita said so anxiously, but Isshiki looked up at the empty sky, placed a finger to the bottom of her jaw, and paused for a bit, seemingly in thought.

"Ah- No, the event place seems to be in a big mess right now, I think I shall put up the posters as well."

This was the reason that she came up with after thinking so long? This girl just wants to slack off..... I thought as such, and of course, the two of them seemed to be thinking of the same thing as well.

".....A,ahaha. Rea, reason seems to be a bit weak."

"Isshiki-San, there's no reason why you can't go back?"

Yuigahama laughed bitterly whilst Yukinoshita smiled frigidly at her.

"It's, it's not what you guys are thinking in the least. I mean, there's really nothing much to do in this event."

Then, why is it that..... When I look at her questioningly, Isshiki sighed as though she looked quite tired.

"Aren't the ratio of the boys and girls in the student council 1:1? Also, it seems like secretary-chan and Vice President are getting along very well? In addition, that, ..., ah, un, well, a lot a lot of things ~ ☆"

With those vague words, she laughed and tried to brush off the awkwardness. How infuriating it is that she just cuts off her words mid-sentence, but she's safe since it's so cute.

".....?"

"Ah, a....., I see now."

Yukinoshita tilted her head, and didn't seem to understand what Isshiki was talking about. Yuigahama seemed to have a better grasp on the situation from the information relayed to her. I too, had more or less understood it.

What was troublesome, was not the contents of the job but the human relationships involved. This commonly happened in the working world.

I had quitted my jobs before over this. Indeed, I just couldn't stand it any longer.

A shop manager started going out with a high school girl. Then, that girl went on to two time him with a new handsome guy that just came in. As a result, the manager bullied the guy. This sort of workplace was really unbearable. So done with it.....

..... Well, this sort of thing happens in every community. Really, it happens everywhere.

Since this was commonplace, it was something that everyone knew about.

Yet, no one had the best solution to it.

As I nearly descended into deep thought over this unsolvable problem that no one else seemed to see, I was jabbed sharply in the back.

"So, hurry up and paste it already! If you can, do it slowly!"

"You sure are eager to waste time. Although it doesn't really matter, it's getting cold outside so I really want to hurry up and get this over with."

Walking to the outside that was separated by only one glass door, the cold air slowly invaded my body, making me shiver uncontrollably.

Looking up at the sky, the brightness left behind in the sky still had the glow of the midday, indicating that there was still some time to go before evening.

The breath exhaled out turned into white mist and disappeared into the heavens. My eyes followed them, trying hard to see where they disappeared to.

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After spreading out the poster, we felt about the place trying to see where we should place the poster.

Compared to the few days before, the wind was comparatively weaker now. Thanks to that, the light paper would not be easily blown about.

As we were readying the paper, Isshiki came back from the convenience store carrying some plastic bags, having bought some cellophane tape.

"It's really as cold as I thought it would be. Here, have some."

From the plastic bag, she retrieved some bottles of red tea, which she probably bought together with the tape. Then she distributed it to both Yukinoshita and Yuigahama.

"Thank you."

"Whoa-, so warm."

Taking it from her, Yukinoshita grasped the bottle with both her hands whereas Yuigahama snuggled the bottle to her face, trying to feel the warmth from it.

"Here, Senpai as well."

"Oh-"

What I received was a can of MAX coffee. This girl sure knows me well.

Opening the can, I drank a mouthful and sighed deeply unintentionally.

The sky was clear, with no clouds to be seen for miles around. It was definitely going to get cold tonight.

It was really quite surprising how the clearer the sky was in the day, the colder it got in the night.

However, upon giving it further thought, this was not really that surprising. This was quite acceptable if one understood the concept of cooling through radiation.

Or possibly, to put it more bluntly and vaguely, it wouldn't be that surprisingly once you realized that winter = cold.

Contrary to expectations, the senses of humans were truly unreliable. The senses of humans were formed through their perceptions, memories as well as misconceptions.

Although I would say that, whether it was clear or dark, this coldness would not change. I grasped the can of MAX coffee tightly to warm my hands before getting to work.

First, was to paste one of the posters on the glass window at the community center entrance.

"Here."

"Thank you."

Yuigahama passed me the poster, and the four corners of it had already been taped with cellophane tape. The only thing left was to press it against the wall, and knock the tape portion to stick it there and we would be done.

In order to make it more visible, I decided to shift it slightly upwards and so, I started to tip-toe.

"Is this ok?"

I turned my head back to seek their confirmation, and Yukinoshita, who was standing a few steps back looking at my work shook her head slightly.

"It's slanted."

"Really? Isn't it how it's supposed to be?"

Re-assessing the poster that I had pasted, I didn't feel that it was slanted horribly in the least. As I tilted my head in doubt, Yukinoshita let out a short sigh all of a sudden.

"It was originally slanted anyway, perhaps to you, it did indeed look that way."

"Oh, that's so believable..... No, I think that you are one of those twisted-types as well? Speaking of which, what is this 'correct' even supposed to mean?"

Turning my head back slightly and asking her, Yukinoshita brushed her hair from her shoulders and stared at me.

"There exists no basis in this world which can tell us whether something is correct. The only thing that exists is people's definition of correct. What am I saying here applies to you, so do as I say and shift it slightly downwards to the left."

"What you are saying now is twisted as well. Right then, how's it now?"²⁹

"I guess it's all right now."

After getting Yukinoshita's approval, I guess I should do the next poster similarly as well. The next poster is going to be pasted at the notice board facing the road. I took the poster and started moving, and once more, tried to feel about the place where the poster should be pasted.

In response, Yukinoshita followed after me. Yuigahama too kept up with Yukinoshita with quick steps and Isshiki, for some reason, walked at a brisk pace as well, walking along with the two by their side.

"Hikki, a little bit upwards, upwards!"

"It's too far up. Move it down a little."

²⁹ Random mention of Watari spamming the same word over 5 sentences. Looks nice in the novel but when translated, the effect is lost. Λ

“Eh, instead of doing that, wouldn’t it be better if you moved it to the left a little first?”

.....Un, you guys. Let one person give the instructions, would you?

All this about up or down or left-right left-right. Putting up the poster by following their instructions gave me the feeling that I was inputting the KONAMI code (A thought that was just like an elementary school student.) However, elementary school students now surely have no idea of what the KONAMI code is.

“Let’s leave it like this. Shall we go paste one more?”

I slapped the poster that I was done pasting, and ensured that it was stuck properly before turning my head back to them. Isshiki shook her head as she clasped the cocoa can with her hands that were hidden by those overly long sleeves of her shirt.

“Well-, this will do. There won’t be a lot of people here. This is more or less just a sign to show that there is such an event here.”

Is that so..... Well, if one only planned for friends and acquaintances to come to this event, then indeed, this would suffice. Furthermore, things such as signs were surprisingly important. Even if the world we live in today was a convenient one whereby we could search for the location of events through our phones, there are still those times where one goes “Is this really the place? It would be embarrassing if I got it wrong so I should just go back”. Signs are important! It was all thanks to these signs that I had given up on the job interviews several times!

Although I think that, I did wonder what sort of people would come to this event today..... Our job only extended to helping out till the day of the event. I had no understanding of the nature of the event.

Miura and Ebina-san who came to consult us, as well as Kawasaki, said they would definitely be coming as well. Other than them, Hayama,

who was in charge of taste-testing would probably bring along..... As I was thinking of all this, a familiar figure came walking across from the pathway.

Yuigahama who noticed the figure waved her hands in a grand manner.

“Ah, it’s Hina and them. Yahello!”

“Hello hello. I will be in your care today.”

Seeing the traffic light change from red to green light, Ebina-san ran across the street. The person who was running beside her, was Tobe.

“Hello!”

What’s up with that greeting, was he some kind of sausage?³⁰ He was more pumped up than usual, probably due to the event. Ebina-san started to chat noisily with Yuigahama as well.

As I was thinking that Tobe was just as annoying as always, Miura, who had followed behind them, seemed much quieter.

Miura glanced occasionally at the existence at her side, and at times readjusted her bag position and at other times, played with her hair. She seemed unable to calm herself down.

Well, that can’t be helped. After all, she’s going to be giving that guy chocolates to eat later.

Although I had no idea what she said to be able to invite him, Miura seemed to have succeeded at inviting Hayama out to this event.

Anyway, she has gotten past the first stage. Now, all Miura needed to do was to make her own chocolates and that would settle her request. I

³⁰ The actual way Tobe greets people is ちょりーっす (Chorissu) which is like hi, but in their own dialect. The sausage here refers to chorizo.

couldn't help feeling relieved and so, picked up the can of MAX coffee at the bottom of the stairs, and drank from it slowly. Then, came the sound of hurried footsteps.

At the next instant, Isshiki came into my line of sight.

"Ah, Hayama-senpai! Thank you for coming today."

Saying that, Isshiki immediately went to stand beside Hayama. Even though Miura gave Isshiki a sharp glare, Isshiki ward off that glare with a radiant smile of her own. Ah ah, a new obstacle for Miura has appeared.....

"Ya, Iroha. Ah-, was it really a good idea for me to come here? I have never learnt how to make sweets, so I don't think I would be of much use."

Hayama, who was now trapped between Miura and Isshiki had a troubled smile on his face. Thereupon, Miura struck his shoulders lightly.

"Is there a need to worry over some things? I mean, it's more than sufficient for Hayato to just give his opinions....."

"Exactly that-. Well then, we will leave the taste-testing to you!"

Both Miura and Isshiki tried to refrain Hayama from leaving, or perhaps it could be said that they were trying to lure him in with their shy and bashful voices. Hayama, smiled his usual invigorating yet bittersweet smile.

"Anyway, let's go on in."

"Indeed, we still aren't done with the preparations."

Both Yukinoshita and Yuigahama nodded their heads at each other as though confirming something, and Ebina and the rest followed behind them tightly into the community center.

Hayama too, maintained his position of being stuck tightly between Miura and Isshiki, and followed behind as well.

[That guy is sure in some serious troubleahaha] I thought about these random thoughts as I observed them and drank big gulps from the can of MAX coffee. My eyes met with Hayama's all of a sudden.

"Hey."

With a short greeting to me, Hayama used his eyes to urge Miura and Isshiki to go on ahead without him.

Both of them tilted their heads in puzzlement as they proceeded to the hall. After sending them off with a gentle smile, Hayama glanced at me.

"Hikigaya, are you going to be tasting the food as well?"

"Well, probably."

".....So it's like that"

Hearing my answer, Hayama narrowed his eyes. He seemed to be having trouble enduring something before a small laugh escaped him.

"What....."

His eyes looked at me as though he had seen through everything, and his smile had a trace of pity in it.

That look and the way he spoke made me feel the way I felt when I saw him face to face, irritated and annoyed.

Because of that, the voice in which I would reply him was rather sharp.

Thereupon, Hayama shrugged his shoulders and shook his head slightly. His expression was meek. That curious, mature air that he was giving off just now had disappeared.

"Ah, nothing. I think that you are really suited for this job."

"Huh?"

"You like sweet things, right?"

Hayama spoke in a teasing manner and pointed with his finger to the can of MAX coffee in my hand. No, well, I do indeed drink MAX coffee quite frequently.....

"That's why." Hayama added on softly, before sauntering off towards Miura and Isshiki who were waiting for him at the hall.

Whoa, that was dangerous. I was nearly moved by the fact that Hayama-kun knew what drink I liked in that instant. Although I most definitely won't.

.....Rather, I wasn't really feeling that great. If I didn't come up with these sort of pointless jokes to distract myself, I would find myself thinking about all sorts of other things. This was probably the same for Hayama as well. Hence, he had probably chosen those topics to talk about on purpose, and then evaded them just as skillfully as well.

Drinking the rest of the MAX coffee in a single gulp, I gripped the can tightly, even though I know that I would be unable to crush it flat.

Well, at least the work with the posters were completed.

Even though I have yet to see the work that needed to be done inside the community center, I couldn't just stand here and watch, I have to at least do something.

And so, my next job is about to begin.....

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Although I had resigned myself to the fact that I had to do something, but I would never have thought that the job awaiting me would be physical labor.

There were cardboard boxes, both big and small, placed in the middle of the hall. It seems that these boxes contained the chocolates, sugar, baking powder and other similar materials that Isshiki and the student council had prepared.

My current job, was to shift all these to the cooking room on the second floor.

Although it was a good move on their part to have someone deliver all these here, but I wished they had asked them to just help out a bit more and moved those to the second floor..... Well, at least I wasn't asked to accompanying them when they went shopping for all these.

"Alright, let's shift this as quickly as we can."

Tobe rolled up the sleeves of his shirt and with all his might, lifted up the box. The next person to take another box would be me, then the Vice President. This selection of people, no matter how I thought about it, it was definitely Isshiki Iroha's selection..... Another name would be the list of Isshiki Iroha's victims. Incidentally, it should be noted that Hayama-Senpai was totally exempted from this physical labor.

Hugging a box full of materials inside and proceeded to climb up the stairs with a great deal of effort.

"GG. This feels unexpectedly heavy."

Tobe, who had taken the lead in this chore with a high spirit, now approached the stairs with his back swaying left and right as though he had finally realized the weight of the box. Unintentionally, he muttered a "Iyo" sound as he readjusted the box.

Thereupon, the Vice President who was behind me spoke in apologetic tones.

"Sorry, because there are too few guys who can help out with this, so you two are already a very big help in this."

"Eh, it's really nothing....."

"Indeed. Well, I am already used to this sort of thing."

Tobe turned his head to look at us with a fair bit of strength, as though trying to swing his hair away. Then, he smiled broadly. Uck, annoying.

Too dangerous keep your eyes peeled to the front or you might just skip and fall. Also, cut your hair.

However, Tobe was a good natured person in the sense that he is willing to let Isshiki boss him about. The Vice President as well, or maybe he was being tasked to do such arduous chores because he looked too weak to fight back. This is that what again, some series about gathering three people to become a worldly wise man. Perhaps this could become a weapon to defeat vampires.³¹

The three of us expended our energy to shift the boxes and at long last, arrived at the cooking room.

³¹ I THINK it's from kizumonogatari. Not really sure, heh.

As Tobe was hugging the boxes along, he managed to skillfully open the door with his elbow.

Yuigahama and Yukinoshita were already inside. They were spreading out the cooking utensils as well as setting each of the tables.

Miura, Ebina-san and Hayama as well were following the directions of the student council and helping to set up the tables as well.

Anyway, we decided to first go to Isshiki to find out where to put the boxes.

"Thanks for your hard work."

Hearing Yuigahama's words of appreciation, we dropped the boxes on the floor with a thud. Then, Yukinoshita came over to inspect the contents of the box.

"Thank you for your trouble. Isshiki-san, has the ingredients been divided into small portions for everyone yet?"

"Yes yes. All that's left is to distribute these small portions to each table and then we'll be okay."

Isshiki answered as she nodded her head, counting the boxes.

"Seems like everything's here. Then, let's open up the boxes and distribute it."

Receiving Isshiki's cue, the Vice President carried up a box excitedly and went over to Secretary-chan's cooking table.

Both Tobe and I bent our backs forward for the present, and began the job of unsealing the boxes.

Hearing people chattering about this and that as we opened the boxes, it gave off the atmosphere that the event had already started. The person who could truly understand this was probably Tobe. He was shaking his hair about incessantly, seemingly in good spirits.

“As expected, events like these really get you pumped up. Ah, Irohasu seems to be quite the student council president now.”

“Yes duh, I AM the student council president. However, I still do my job as a manager normally too. When the weather’s warmer, I will go and attend club activities.” (TL: If you forget, she’s the soccer-club’s manager.)

No, go and attend it even if the weather’s cold, those club activities.....

Hearing Isshiki’s cheerful response, Tobe laughed as he gave a thumbs up and winked. He’s really getting on my nerves.

Then, after opening the boxes without much of a hitch, we retrieved the chocolate mix and other ingredients that were going to become the main food ingredients of today.

Looking at them, Tobe seemed to have thought of something as he murmured.

“Ah, the chocolates look really delicious. I really want to have a taste.” ³²

“Huh?”

Even though Isshiki was now speaking to him in a cold voice and looking at him as such, Tobe didn’t seem to mind in the least. On the contrary, he took a small breath, and his face tensed up as though having decided on something.

³² Tobe’s lame joke here that was impossible to translate/ I was too lazy to think of a similar lame joke. Original sentence is: チョコうまそうだわー、チョコっと食べたくなるわ. The first choco refers to chocolate, whilst the second ‘choco’ is supposed to be chotto.....

Then, he stood up and took a good look at his surroundings, before waving his hands at us indicating for us to gather.

“What? Some secret you want to tell us?”

“It’s not really convenient to say it now.....”

Yuigahama suddenly stuck her head into the group, a look of interest on her face. Yukinoshita was also somehow dragged here unwillingly by Yuigahama. Then, the formation now was that of a circle. Don’t tell me, that with this formation, we were going to fire our engines and take off? ³³

Once again, Tobe played with his hair at the nape of his neck and curled his hair with his fingers. Although he seemed to have his misgivings, he still opened his mouth shyly to speak. Oi, this isn’t cute at all.

“Ah, no, how do I put it? Isn’t today supposed to be about making chocolates. Then, after thinking about it, I thought it was possible for me to do something on my part.....What do you guys think?”

What do you mean by what do we think. This is not some kind of CM about that rice bean snack..... We are not the mothers here. ³⁴

Anyway, whenever you tried to hit on her, you would either get blocked or she would evade her. If you are really serious, you should act even more low-profile. What’s up with your ‘If a little push won’t do it then I will just shove you to the ground’ that sort of behavior..... Such an extreme sort of guy was so rare that it sets my heart racing just to see one!

However, I seemed to be the only person who was moved by this. The girls’ reactions were extremely slow.

³³ Knights of Sidonia

³⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4zm7FUfQb44>

“.....Ah, anyway, that is to say you want to appeal to her so that you can get some chocolates?”

Seeing that no one had any response, I had no choice but to be the one who summarized whatever he had said. With a swish, Tobe pointed his finger at me directly.

“That’s what I mean! Well, the gist of it is that idea?”

Hearing that, Isshiki gave a look of disgust.

“Although I don’t know who you are targeting, but I feel that it would definitely work contrary to what you believe will happen. Trying to show off your appeal to get chocolates is fundamentally disgusting. Better to be low-profile.”

“Oh, oh.....”

Irohasu was so sharp..... Tobe had nothing better to say in return, and so began to search around for a person who could resolve this awkwardness.

Then, Yukinoshita answered his expectation. With her hands at her jaws, she cocked her head, and came out with a conclusion after giving it some serious thought.

“But, what Isshiki-san just said makes sense as well..... If one could always see this energetic guy whining here and there, it would indeed be quite depressing.”

“.....”

Tobe was completely speechless after having his plans being flat out rejected. Then, why was Irohasu saying “I know right” sweetly to Yukinoshita-san as she leaned against her shoulder.....

Just as I was thinking ‘this response was too pitiful’, Yuigahama groaned.

“A, Un..... But, if the other party were to make it seem like they don’t want it at all then that would be a problem as well.....”

“Wouldn’t it!?”

His mood seemed to have changed all a sudden, and with his vigor restored, he snapped his fingers. Then, in response to that, Isshiki’s harsh voice came again.

“No no no, what Yuigahama-senpai meant was those situations in which the other party had already intended to give away chocolates. Hence, Tobe-senpai’s situation is different.”

“Is that so.....”

Having had so many ‘No’ thrown in his face, accompanied by the waving of their hands, even Tobe seemed dejected.

However, the possibility of it happening was not zero. Although there weren’t clear evidence of that, Ebina-san showing up at this event to make chocolates was sufficient proof that she had changed a little. Of course, this might be only because she was accompanying Miura here, but I had no idea of the exact reason.

It was because of such vague situations that I felt that this event would really be effective.

“Well, if (she) made it with her best efforts, then letting someone taste it for (her) wouldn’t be that much of a problem, although I aren’t really sure of that. Anyway, let’s just move this over there first.”

Saying that, I pushed the rest of the boxes to Tobe. Originally, Tobe was still in shock but after realizing the logic in what I said, smacked his palm fiercely.

“Yes! That would be it!”

Looking refreshed and after pointing his finger at me once more, he picked up the boxes and hurriedly began moving towards Ebina-san and friends’ cooking table. This guy, even his reactions were getting on my nerves, although he wasn’t really a bad guy.

However, where exactly is Tobe’s hometown..... He’s seriously going overboard with the ‘That would be it!’.

(TL: Tobe likes to spam the phrase Dabe, which is a word in some dialects that translates roughly to That (would be) it. Well, something like that.)

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After that, the preparations for the cooking event proceeded on, and it gradually became a good time.

Isshiki and Yukinoshita, as well as Yuigahama seemed to be having some sort of discussion. I didn't have anything that I wanted to say, nor did I have anything to do. Thus, I just stood there listening to their conversation.

Then, amidst the voices from their discussion, a great deal of noise could be heard coming from outside the door.

Glancing at my watch, it seems like now would be the time where the people would start arriving.

That voice, sounded like it came from Kawasomething-san.....but the number of voices were really too numerous. Or perhaps there were a lot

of people named Kawasomething but I just didn't know it? If that's the case then I can still accept the fact that I don't remember her name.

Well then, exactly what sort of Kawasomething-San came here today, Kawashima, Kawaguchi, Kawagoe, Kawanakajima, Sendaisendai..... I stared at the door, so as to be ready to react to whichever Kawasomething-San that would come through it.

Then, the door burst open.

And the person that stood there, was Tamasomething-San.

"Yo, Iroha-chan. Ah, wonderful. As expected, the event last time received a lot of good reputation. In order to further our PARTNERSHIP, I took up this OFFER as a chance to continue our ALLIANCE activities."

"So it is. Thanks for your work."

Isshiki brushed him aside just like that, not bothering one bit about the long introduction he just made.

Kaihinsougou High school student council president, Tamanawa.....

That strong jab still existed whenever I bumped into him..... If he had that golden left arm that could turn the wheel at high speeds, he would surely become an outstanding talent in the world. ³⁵

In fact, not only Tamanawa, even his friends were here as well. They were probably also from the student council. I have seen that crowd of people that were now streaming into the cooking room at the last Christmas event. Also, I think I kind of remember that annoying hairpin and that irritating producer.

³⁵ Jojo's bizarre adventure, Johnny Joestar.

"This sort of opportunity is a BUSINESS CHANCE. Perhaps we can start a scheme that accumulates capital through CROWD FUNDING."

"That, I AGREE."

"If we can create a METHOD whereby we could give back some INCENTIVE, we might be able to make it into the EARLY ADAPTOR category."

"In FLEA MARKETS in AMERICA, kids usually hone their business sense through selling LEMONADE. This is NEARLY like that, isn't it?"

"Yes indeed, that is also a CASE STUDY."

In the context of their conversation, even a word like lemonade could sound like they have high self-awareness. Unbelievable.

If these guys were talking about lifeguards and milk and coffee, would it sound like that as well?

"I totally have no idea of what they are saying as usual."

I murmured subconsciously, and Yukinoshita sighed a little.

"It's just that your self-awareness is really low. Your pupils are open and your lips are turning purple, even the response from you is shallow when talking to you." ³⁶

"I think you meant my level of consciousness."

Come to think of it, if your pupils remain open, doesn't it mean that you are already dead..... However, those fellows really haven't changed one

³⁶ Playing around with the words 意識 here.....意識高く; 意識低い; 意識レベル; means high self/social(?) awareness; low self/social(?) awareness and consciousness level respectively. When Yukinoshita says that sentence, she's deliberately uses the "wrong" word to mock Hikki, hence prompting Hikki's reply of level of consciousness (in reference to how she says his lips turn purple etc.) I don't really have a good translation for 意識高く/低い ...

bit..... Well, humans won't change so easily anyway. Rather, they wouldn't become like this if they could've just given up after one or two setbacks. Although if you thought about it from another angle, you would have some respect for him as that would mean that they stuck through with their principles till the very end.

Un un, no matter what, I still hope that Tamanawa-san and his friends could stay this way. As I thought about this, someone stuck their head out from behind the crowd of people.

"Ah, Hikigaya-kun. You really did come!"

"Oh, oh oh."

As usual, Orimoto who had no regards for the sense of distance between us waved hi to me ever so casually. Just like that, she extricated herself from the Kaihinsougou High crowd, and approached me.

Then, Orimoto's gaze shifted to something behind me.

"Ah, hello."

"Hel, hello."

Orimoto nodded her head to conclude her greetings, and a somewhat flustered Yuigahama answered her. Yukinoshita crossed her arms, and greeted her with her eyes only.

What happened, what's up with this queer stinging atmosphere.....

Now that I think of it, the three of them had never had a proper chance to converse. It was a situation whereby they each knew that the other existed, that's all. Although it wasn't that I wished that their relations could improve, but I really hope to be spared from this cold atmosphere that arose from the three of them.

Irohasu-, save me Irohasu-! Compared to Orimoto, it was easier to strike up a conversation with her, as well as create a pleasant atmosphere. I looked at her with pleading eyes, but the only thing I got in response was the sound of a cough.

“Ahem,” came the sound of a somewhat deep cough. I was just thinking how this was not cute at all for Isshiki when I realized that the cough came from Tamanawa. He seemed to have noticed my existence due to Orimoto saying hi to me and his expression now was somewhat bitter.

“You guys are here too.....”

“Ah, I thought I told you all?”

Isshiki placed her thin fingers to her glossy lips, and tilted her head slightly. This girl sure is amazing at playing dumb.....

“U, un..... Is that so? I don’t seem to recall anything like that at all from the mails we sent through Mailbase.....”

Isshiki cast a sidelong glance at the groaning Tamanawa, then turned to look at me and stuck her tongue out playfully. Whoa, what’s this, you are being too cute.

I didn’t know whether he had finally given up on asking Isshiki, who was doing a spectacular job of playing dumb. Tamanawa mumbled and grumbled underneath his breath, and walked in a direction away from us. The people of Kaihinsougou High followed behind tightly.

“Well, see you again soon.”

Orimoto raised her hand up lightly, and quickly melded into that crowd of people.

Watching that disappearing figure, I began to talk with Isshiki, whose face still had that fake smile on it.

“That, what’s up with them, those guys.....”

“If we cooperate with them, we could probably rope in some of their budget, wouldn’t that be great! I can also save on the cost of the obligatory chocolates, so lucky~”

“Oh, oh.....”

As expected of Isshiki Iroha..... Always exceeding expectations..... I started worrying for her with thoughts like, ‘Was this really okay, this girl is going to reap her just rewards one day,’ and looked at her with disdain. Isshiki seemed a little troubled as well, and her face blushed slightly as she coughed.

“Anyway, the budget more or less comes from the collection of the entry fee. Thinking from the perspective of the budget itself, this event itself will surely reap a profit. Well, if you subtract all the miscellaneous expenses, then with the coming and going away and the pluses and minuses will balance each other out.”

“I really don’t understand what Iroha-chan is saying at all.”

Yuigahama hugged her head, looked vexed.

Well, people with high awareness and people in the nosiness world are in some parts similar after all..... Incidentally, ‘coming and going away’ as well as ‘plus and minuses’ have essentially the same meaning of balancing each other out.

However, Isshiki did all this sort of things for the sake of investing into the student council budget. Or maybe the posters and stuff were a means to leave behind physical evidence that such an event actually took place. If these physical items existed, then filing a return would definitely be more convenient. This girl sure had a mind for business.

The entry fee can also be quite easily determined through business prices by Show by Rock, pyuru.³⁷

Drawing in another school, hence multiplying your budget, then with the collecting of entry fees, increasing the budget even more with a Quiz-Derby style quiz.³⁸

No, if someone were to point out that everything Isshiki has done was for the student council's own uses or that there was misappropriation of funds, I doubt that they can find an excuse for it..... Well, it's not like I really understand how the money is managed so I will just turn a blind eye to this this time. Anyway, [it's not my money so I don't really care], this sort of corporate slave-like thinking was deeply embedded within me.

Just hearing this alone is enough to give one a headache, in reality, she still did in fact manage to successfully set up this event with that, which showed that her efforts were not in vain.

It looked like I was not the only person who seemed to be having a headache. Yukinoshita too, was placing a hand at her temple and sighed deeply.

"Let's not talk about the rights and wrongs of your line of thinking..... Isshiki-san, you really exceeded expectations there, exceeded them outstandingly."

"Indeed indeed, Isshiki-san, you are pretty amazing~. Although you can be quite capricious at times."

"Ah, I think I understand a little of what you mean by that....."

³⁷ Show by Rock. Pyuru is a meaningless sound added on to back of the sentence, because why not?

Incidentally, 商売 = shoubai (meaning: business) but Watari likes to twist things and poof it becomes Show by rock in the same sentence.

³⁸ Quiz Derby. Feel free to google.

Hearing that pleasant voice, Yuigahama gave a bitter smile. Ah, I agree with you totally.

.....Pleasant?

That voice was different from Yukinoshita, Yuigahama and Isshiki. It was a voice that was a little hypnotizing, and I turned my head towards that voice spontaneously.

With a hairpin at her fringe that ran down her forehead, and with a swish of her pigtails, a warm and pleasant air filled the surroundings. And so, there appeared Megu☆rin with his bright wide smile.

“Ah! Shiromeguri-senpai!”

“Hel, Hello.....”

The sound of Yuigahama’s surprised exclamation and the sound of Yukinoshita’s bewildered greeting overlapped with one another. The two of them blinked their eyes in surprise.

“Un! Hello.”

The student council president of the previous generation, Shiromeguri-senpai was waving her hand in front of her modest chest in greeting.

“That, why is she here.....”

I felt the Megurin-effects, who had appeared out of nowhere, (main effects being healing and relaxation, a sister attribute, etc) , or so I heard that’s what they were. Meguri-senpai clapped her hands, bent her neck slightly and then spoke happily.

“I was invited here..... and so here I am.”

Laughing sheepishly, the pleasant air continue to float about, and the Megumegumegurin☆meguri-shu effects activated (Main effects being resurrection and detoxification, and with the addition of the sister attribute, there was the additional effect of occasionally being able to witness the innocent actions of her amidst the matured feel she was exuding. Enemy, instant death.)

Conversing with us so warmly and pleasantly, she suddenly took a step forward, and clasped Isshiki's hands tightly.

"I was invited to here~. I have to come up with formal speech at the graduation ceremony, so I went to school and along the way, ran into Isshiki-san. She asked me to come here if I had the time."

Oh, so it was Isshiki who invited her. Seems like she wasn't really good at getting along with Meguri-senpai..... I looked at her and she turned her face away unhappily, and spoke to me in a very small voice.

".....Well, in a way, if there are more people here, the unit price will go down."

Seems like none of what she had said so softly managed to reach Meguri-senpai. Rather, she seemed to be very happy at being invited by Isshiki, and shook her hand vigorously. At the same time, Isshiki twisted her body here and there, seemingly quite uncomfortable with the situation.

"I have already been accepted into a university so I am quite free. My friends all seem so busy preparing for exams..... So, as a member with spare time, I thought that I would come here."

"Haa, so it's like that....."

As soon as I answered her, a sense of unease came over me. Member? What a strange way to put it..... It was like as though she was a suspect and saying such weird things under some kind of unknown pressure. I

don't really understand what she meant. I looked at her face and then she turned to someone behind her.

"Yup?"

With that, a few students suddenly appeared from behind her. What's this, nin nin, ninja? I tried to search my hazy memories, and I think that I might have seen them before. The impression of those glasses, as well as the 'glasses atmosphere'. They were probably the people from the spectacles student council of the last generation.

As expected, with regards to how the student council should be run, there were still a lot of opinions on that. Isshiki, as a student council president, had gone through a lot up till now. Furthermore, perhaps for Meguri-senpai, the student council remains a special place to her.

At last, Meguri-senpai released Isshiki's hand and placed her hands gently on the shoulders of both Yukinoshita and Yuigahama. Then, she looked at us dearly.

"I think, that although it was slightly different from what I had envisioned, but still, to think that I can still have the luxury to appear at this sort of student-council organized events, to be able to chat with Yukinoshita-san, Yuigahama-san, ... Hikigaya-kun as well, it makes me really happy."

"Me....., me too!"

Perhaps Yuigahama too had been affected by the Megurin power, and she replied with a warm smile. Even though Yukinoshita did not answer, her drooping ears were somewhat red as well.

Come to think of it, with regards to our Service club, the only senpai that understood it was probably only Meguri-senpai.

.....Uh-oh, if I saw her giving her formal speech at the graduation ceremony, I might just cry. If I had my way, the tears would already be flowing out of my eyes now. Even though I had a reputation of being especially weak against those younger than me, I was similarly weak against older sisterly like figures as well.

I am really glad that I have this person who I can regard as my senpai. As I was thinking such pleasant thoughts, Meguri-senpai was done looking at our faces and nodded her head.

Then, as though she was getting psyched for something, she clenched her hand into a fist tightly.

“Alright, then let’s give our all for today! O!”

No one followed suit when she threw her fist up into the air and shouted. As for Isshiki, that serious expression previously had disappeared from her, and was now looking at Meguri-senpai in an apathetic manner.

However, that cold gaze did not shake Meguri-senpai even one bit, and once again, pumped her fist up into the air.

“O!”

“.....O, o---”

If there was no reply, this was going to be repeated a few more times..... Furthermore, the pressure exerted by those former student council members behind Meguri-senpai was especially strong..... As they observed, they raised their hand to the height of a cat punch. With regards to our response, Meguri-senpai sighed in satisfaction.

Then, she shifted her gaze to the clock on the wall. I followed her gaze as well. People were starting to come in at this time, and the preparations

of the ingredients and utensils were done as well. Kawasaki and the rest seemed to be a little later, but they should be here shortly as well.

It was about to begin. As I thought that, Meguri-senpai tilted her head seemingly in deep thought.

“Haru-san seems to be late.”

“Indeed, I thought this place was really quite easy to find.”

Isshiki nodded her head in reply to Meguri-senpai. Then, I froze there on the spot, not nodding my head. That was because I had heard something unsettling.

Haru-san. This was not in reference to the room maids at the hot springs.³⁹ There was only one person who Meguri-senpai would refer to as such.

Quickly looking at the person next to me, I saw that Yukinoshita was frowning. Yuigahama seemed to have sensed the mood as well, and kept staring at the door.

Before long, the sound of heels could be heard.

The door that was not shut tightly moved a little bit. The soft and slim fingers appeared from the door cracks and with a little bit of strength, the door opened with a crackle.

Then, with a thud sound, the sound of her footstep made with her heels sounded out. Slowly, step by step, she walked into the room, right in front of us.

“Hyahello! Sorry, am I late?”

³⁹ • I believe it’s a reference to Haru-chan, a very ancient series. Here’s the OP: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b5FbSRlnYYg>

Also, those room maids are called nakai-san.

“And so, here is our special cook of today, Harusan senpai!”

“Hi everyone, I am Haru-san senpai.”

Isshiki finished her introductions sweetly and to that, Haruno-san responded to her in a joking manner. Yukinoshita Haruno ignored the crimson red coat fluttering about in the wind, and raised her hands up high in greeting.

“Ah, Haru-san, it’s been a long time.”

“.....Meguri, didn’t I just meet you recently?”

Seeing Meguri-senpai approaching towards her slowly, she patted her forehead lightly and asked in a surprised tone.

“Haru-san’s snacks are really delicious, I am really looking forward to them.”

“Well, since you asked for them, I will definitely make them. As a kind senpai, I can’t possibly reject a kouhai’s request~”

Rather than describe herself as kind, it would be more appropriate to say that it was combative. ⁴⁰The feeling that it gave people could only be described as fear.....

Once the two of them were done exchanging their greetings, they began to converse.

Taking this chance, I signaled to Isshiki quietly and spoke softly.

“Hey, why did you call her here?”

⁴⁰ The word used in the LN is ヤシャシーン which becomes ヤシャスイーン which is Persian for something like charge/attack. Why Persian? Because Arslan Senki.

“Because, she seems to be a veteran in this?”

Isshiki cocked her head at my question and answered as though it was the most obvious thing in the world. Ah ah, your judgement is wonderfully correct. Rather than say she was a veteran, it would be better to just say that she was ever victorious.⁴¹

“I am more than enough for the job.....”

Yukinoshita hugged her elbow, and shifted her gaze away from Haruno-san, who was opposite her.

“Well, let’s not talk about your teaching methods, but the snacks that you make are indeed very tasty.”

“..... It’s not like it’s anything special.”

Yukinoshita seemed surprised at being praised and seemed momentarily at a loss for words but quickly turned her face away. No, she was not praising you. She did say that your teaching methods being horrible.

“But, I really look forward to having Yukinon teaching me!”

Yuigahama flew towards Yukinoshita, and Yukinoshita coughed, her mood having recovered somewhat.

.....Well, if there some someone else other than Yukinoshita who could teach the crowd, that means there was one more person who could be in charge of Yuigahama, which wasn’t necessarily a bad thing.

However, why did one have to find someone like Haruno-san. That was something that weighed heavily on my mind.

⁴¹ More of a play on words. Veteran = 百戦錬磨 and the next sentence uses 百戦百勝. Which literally means out of a 100 fights, I win 100 times.

In the first place, if we were to consider the number of participants in this event, there wasn't a whole lot of people that needed coaching. Furthermore, Isshiki did say that she had a flair for this as well. There would also be several other girls who would have had experience in making confectionaries as well.

"Must it really be that person? Talking about Yukinoshita alone, what she makes will definitely be tastier than all those other people."

Quietly, I asked Isshiki about the reason why she invited Haruno-san of all people.

"Well, to be perfectly honest, I think that Yukinoshita-senpai makes some super delicious confections. So, that's why I requested her to come."

Isshiki broke off mid-sentence at this point, and shifted her gaze, looking embarrassed.

"Just that, that..... it's kind of questionable whether the guys will accept her."

"Such keen insight....."

In truth, Yukinoshita was really good at cooking, but she lacked the service spirit, or rather, the 'service scene'. To be more explicit, she lacked the 'service' near her chest area. In contrast, Yuigahama's 'service' was amazing, but the cooking skills was catastrophic..... Ah, I don't know whether that should be referred to as steady, or rather a firm and standard way of making the snacks. What Isshiki referred to as being accepted by the guys, as well as how girls would show off their appeal via the snacks they made; in this aspect, I did indeed feel uneasy.

Talking about this, for Yukinoshita Haruno, she could capture any person's heart, regardless of gender. No, I meant smashing it after capturing it.

Taking her ability to see through a person's heart for example, there was no one better than her at that amongst all those that I knew.

Furthermore, she was someone whose spec surpassed that of Yukinoshita. As such, even when it comes to this event, she would definitely use all her might and tricks. It was going to be so skillfully done that not just humans, but even sprites and fairies were going to be tamed by her? ⁴²

If I don't think about these sort of things whilst cracking jokes about it, I was going to feel really uneasy about it.

Yukinoshita Haruno, a person whereby there was a meaning behind all her meaningless actions.

She was here today because there was something she wanted to do. She wouldn't show up anywhere just because her kouhai asked her to.

This time was no different.

That person, will be as her name suggests, she will expose everything under the broad daylight.

Whilst all the time, hiding everything about herself from everyone.

Chapter 5

[Unexpectedly, Hiratsuka Shizuka talks about the present and the past.]

There were not much obstacles hindering the event nor did it contain any sort of eye-catching performances. The event continues to progress on slowly.

⁴² Main plotline of Humanity has declined.

As the scheduled time for the event's beginning approaches, everyone was merely looking at each other and the atmosphere surrounding it had the feel of 'It's about to start'. Isshiki gave a simple opening speech and everyone then proceeded to do their own cooking.

Naturally, I wouldn't go and make chocolate and so had nothing else to do. If I had to describe what I was going to be doing in this event, it would be along the lines of being an assistant, a helper to support and do follow-ups. In other words, I was like an unemployed person.

In contrast to me, Yukinoshita immediately hurried off to begin her work.

At the kitchen table in front of me, I could see Yukinoshita, Yuigahama as well as Miura, who were standing in front of the cooking utensils, each with a serious expression on their face.

"First is to cut up the chocolate then warm them up by immersing it in hot water. Although it slightly differs depending on what you want to make, but this step is necessary in any case."

"Just that?"

".....Well, this is the basic. Although I might say that, but the following steps after this are very important as well."

Whilst answering Miura's question that sounded like she was quite disappointed, Yukinoshita began to start cutting the chocolate into fine pieces with the carving knife in a rhythmical manner.

Seeing how she cut the chocolates so smoothly as though she had had a lot of practice on it, Yuigahama went 'Oh!' in an exclamation of praise.

No, I didn't think that there was anything worth admiring at this point in time.

Thereupon, Miura began to imitate Yukinoshita as well. Perhaps it was because she was not too used to using a carving knife, she set about crushing the chocolate nervously, making a 'Ka-cha', 'Ka-cha' sound as she did so. Incidentally, Yuigahama has still not been allowed to touch the carving knife. Oh well, guess that can't be helped.

When the chocolates were almost all chopped up into fine pieces, Miura looked up from her work. Her expression suggested that she was somewhat satisfied. It's still not completely done, you know.....

However, Miura seemed to feel that she was quite skilled at this.

"Hmm..... Isn't this super easy?"

Miura gave a proud smile as she said, "How's that" in a boastful voice. However, two voices flew towards her from her sides almost immediately.

"So naïve, Yumiko!"

"You're so naïve."

Yuigahama said so forcefully and without hesitation. Yukinoshita said that with a scornful smile on her face. Miura shook her head, probably because she was still stuck in the impression that doing the actual task was way easier than the instructions had sounded.

"Huh? What great difficulty is there?"

Hearing that, Yuigahama puffed out her chest proudly.

"The difficult parts starts now! Warming something by immersing it in hot water is just about putting it in the hot water. You have to do it like Gwa---- Gwa---- something like that."

I guess that what Yuigahama was saying was something related to mixing or tempering. Or perhaps she was actually referring to the progressive tense of Tenpa? That surely can't be it! ⁴³

On the other hand, upon hearing what Yuigahama said, Yukinoshita placed her hand to her temple as though remembering something headache-inducing, and in between sighs, spoke.

"If you just let the melted chocolate harden like this, the white fats will rise to the surface, making it unsightly, and affect the taste as well. Furthermore, the time and effort spent in the process after this will take a lot of effort as well.

Come to think of it, the level of both of their words differed so much..... The difference between them was like the difference between a P2W and a causal player.

However, looking at how Yuigahama was backing up her words with such conviction and how logical Yukinoshita's statements seemed to be, Miura seemed to have changed her opinion as well.

"Hmm. I see. Then, what's next?"

Although the words that she said seemed very much like her usual self, her attitude had changed admirably. At least she seemed humble enough now that she wants to seek advice from them.

Seeing Miura like this, Yukinoshita gave a small smile.

"For now, we will just start with the mixing and tempering. After this, the work that is to be done will be different depending on what you want to make..... Well, there's a quite a bit of people here so let's just go with baking a chocolate gateau."

⁴³ Tenpa -> When you are one tile away from completing the winning hand in mahjong, you "listen" for this last tile that player either discards/drawn by you.

“Chocolate gateau! Isn’t that like something made by shops?”

“It’s not really that difficult..... I will use black chocolate, while Miura-san and Yuigahama can just use whatever you like.”

Yuigahama’s eyes were sparkling and she looked at Yukinoshita with respect whilst Miura-san gaze had a “Hnnng, this girl is really good at this” sort of feeling to it. Yukinoshita responded to these with a wry smile.

Well, I was still a little worried for Yuigahama, but with Yukinoshita there, there shouldn’t be too many problems.

Now then, time to see what the others were doing, and so I shifted my gaze to the kitchen table next to the current one, and saw the figure of Isshiki Iroha making her sweets at her own pace.

From where I stood, she seemed to be doing just fine at her cooking.

The chocolate had already been melted, and the chocolate in the bowl had a smooth finish to it. In another bowl, there was meringue that was already whisked. Seeing this sight, one could easily tell that she was quite used to doing this sort of baking.

Isshiki continued to drip small drops of something that resembled Western liquor in to the bowl, and then proceeded to mix it. Then she took a spoon to scoop some of it out, and proceeded to taste it.

As she bit on the spoon, she shook her head, seemingly not very satisfied with the result. Then, once more, she begin to add sugar, fresh cream and cocoa powder and all sorts of things into the mixture.

“My word, you are really good at this, aren’t you.”

Perhaps one could say that it was unexpected, but I spoke that out of surprise as I didn’t really think that she was this proficient at cooking.

Thereupon, Isshiki glanced at me scornfully.

“Senpai, are you doubting my words?”

“No, it’s not that…… I only felt that you were really good at this, and you are putting in a lot of effort in this as well.”

If she was working so hard just to be able to get Hayama to eat her chocolate, then this earnestness in her would let one have a good impression of her. ……Well, perhaps she also had the hidden intention of raising the value of her obligatory chocolate, but maybe it was because of her uniform and her apron, this also let me feel that she really was putting in great effort in this. How strange. I want to reiterate my point here, that a naked apron was still better than an apron worn over a uniform! Still, the best is Komachi wearing sleeveless short pants.

When I was done with what I had to say, Isshiki blinked several times in surprise at what she heard, but almost immediately, she thrust both her hands outwards so as to keep a certain distance away from me.

“Are you hitting on me? It’s sweet, but naïve at the same time if you thinking that whispering sweet words to me would work just because I’m making sweets. You’re going to have to try again. I’m sorry.”

She lowered her head politely and rejected me bluntly.

I am not hitting on you and I am not going to ‘try again’……

Isshiki was acting just like she always did. No, that slyness of hers had probably grown quite a bit. I respected her and was amazed at the same time as well, for that, I couldn’t help but sigh. Thereupon, a spoon came passing by the side of my mouth.

“Eh!”

Following Isshiki's voice, the spoon flew by the side of my jaw and was thrust straight into my mouth. Being surprised by this sudden turn of event, I was blinked my eyes several times, clearly flustered, and in my flickering vision, I could see Isshiki's alluring smile.

"Senpai, this sort of sweet thing, do you hate it?"

As she shook her spoon, she tilted her head, and looked at me with upturned eyes. Her smile was one that was like a child's smile upon a successful prank, but her puffing out her chest was provocative, which formed an imbalance. That's why this was seriously alluring.

"..... I don't really hate it."

The amount of sugar in this was definitely not little, and my tongue was about to numb from all that sweetness. Come to think of it, wasn't this spoon the one that you just used for..... Doing this sort of thing was really bad for the heart so could you please stop doing this the next time.....

Although it could be said that sweet things were good for fatigue, but the adverse effect was larger this time. Suddenly, a wave of fatigue wash over me and I couldn't help but sigh, to which Isshiki did the same as well.

"Haa. I am not really interested in hearing your thoughts about the taste."

Although she seemed disinterested from the way she spoke, but her gaze seemed to be suggesting that she was waiting for an answer.

As I savored the remaining sweetness in my mouth, I pondered over the unspoken meaning of Isshiki's words.

"Even so, my answer will still not change."

“.....Is that so.”

Isshiki seems to be thinking about something, and stared at the bowl in her hand, then nodded her head. She raised her head almost immediately again.

“I could use this as reference. Then, I will be leaving for a bit. Hayama sen----- pai-----”

As she wrapped up what she wanted to say with a smile, she started running towards Hayama with a light pitter patter of footsteps.

I watched her leave, and with my finger, wiped the chocolate off my face and put it into my mouth. The smell of chocolate and rum entered my nose.

“It’s too sweet.....”

Just as I was murmuring my thoughts, I suddenly heard the sound of metal objects scraping against one another.

That sort of noise sent chills down my spine, and I turned my head to look at the source of the unpleasant sound, and saw Yukinoshita hugging a bowl, and stirring the contents in it with a spoon.

“.....Come to think of it, Hikigaya-kun is in charge of tasting. Because you have been useless up till now, I have completely forgotten about you. By all means, won’t you come over here as well and give your opinions (on the taste) as well?”

Saying that, Yukinoshita extended the spoon handle towards me. The spoon itself was filled with pure black chocolate.

“Your cocoa content is over 90%, it will definitely be very bitter.....”

I didn't have to eat it to know. That there wasn't sufficient sugar or fresh cream in it, and at best, there was only a little bit of unsalted butter in it.

From the appearance and the smell of the black luster of the chocolate, it gave off a 'super cocoa' feeling.

However, Yukinoshita continued to look at me coldly, and didn't seem like she was going to back off. She even proceeded to take another step towards me, and thrust the spoon silently in my direction. I wasn't going to accept this sort of spoon and so the two of us continued to stare at each other, until Yuigahama came between us.

"Ah, how's mine! What about mine!"

As she said that, she brought her bowl over to me as well. The fluid in the bowl was a light brown color. It would be ridiculous to call that thing in the bowl chocolate. In fact, it wasn't even really appropriate to call it chocolate sauce, perhaps it would be more believable to call it chocolate milk.

Without hesitation, I thrust my nose forward and took a sniff. There was a sweet smell to it.

"I think that Hikki will most likely like this....."

As I watched Yuigahama pass me the bowl with an "Ehehe----- How's this" sort of expression, I felt a strange sense of déjà vu. That was a choking and sweet fragrance that reminded me of coffee. There was a whiteness amidst the brown color, the foam that made me feel as though it had a high sugar content..... It kind of looks like MAX coffee.....

However, the person who made this was Yuigahama, its actual taste was definitely different from its appearance..... This girl, the taste will shock you just like a jack-in-the-box. I mean, weren't we supposed to be making chocolate here?

The bitterness that was evident in the dark matter without even having to eat it. As well as the dark matter whereby I had no way of guessing how it would taste like. This sweetness and bitterness caused me to feel faint.

Facing the both of them, my voice clammed up in my throat.

“Wai, wait just a moment?”

As I was still deliberating, the door of the cooking room was thrown wide open.

What followed next was the sound of high heels striking the floor with displeasure. The person who made that noise swiftly walked towards us, and the breath from that person sounded like it was the wind from the depths of hell.

[Tsk, even the air is full of the sweet fragrance.....”

Her annoyed murmur seemed to suggest that the air was like a noxious miasma, and the owner of that voice, was unmistakably Hiratsuka Shizuka-chan (Single woman of around thirty) ! (TL: No good translation on my part, it’ s just supposed to be (SINGLE ・ アラサ))

Although Hiratsuka had said so in a very displeased manner, but there really wasn’t any trace of the sweet smell that she spoke of in here.....

“That, Hiratsuka-sensei why are you here.....”

“Hm? Ah, because I heard Isshiki’s reports. So, I decided to come down here and take a look.”

Hearing Yukinoshita’s question, Hiratsuka sighed before responding. Then, she glanced at the contents of the bowls that Yukinoshita and Yuigahama were holding, and laughed softly.

"I forgot to say, that chocolates are not allowed to be brought into school."

"There's such a rule?"

Yuigahama tilted her head, and Hiratsuka-sensei revealed an evil smile.

"There's no such rule, however, it's still banned. This thing is not related to school work and it's also very troublesome, very annoying. Why do you think I supported the abolishment of obligatory chocolate in the staffroom? Although it will be quite a bother, but students too should undergo the same pain as well. Because love and feelings can only grow stronger from the existence of obstacles in its path!"

This fellow, how is she able to give such a pretty smile but say such lousy things! This aspect of her, was really lovable! However, frankly speaking, I think that romances that begin from obligatory chocolate do exist as well! People who can take both chocolates and teachers as their partner, were being mass-recruited everywhere!

"Anyway, no matter what, I will take a one-day leave on the day of the entrance examinations."

As Hiratsuka-sensei said that, she gave a gentle smile before adding "Just kidding."

"Well, do you best~"

Hearing her words, Yuigahama gave a little troubled smile, whereas Yukinoshita turned her face away abruptly. Seeing the attitude of the two of them, Hiratsuka sensei gave a wry smile as well, but patted their heads once more in the end.

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Thanks to Hiratsuka-sensei, or perhaps I should say thanks to the existence of this intruder, the mood of the current situation seems to have changed slightly. Accompanying the spread of the sweet fragrance, the cooking room began to be filled with a calm and quiet air.

Then, another person who fitted the image of this calm and quiet atmosphere appeared.

This kid's bluish-black hair was split into two, and extended down to her shoulders. She wore an appropriate sized apron as well. She was someone who I definitely believed will grow into a beauty in the future. Her set of facial features was something that I remembered clearly.

Kawasaki Keika. The sister of Kawasomething-san.

Kawasaki had first went to the nursery to pick up her sister, and had arrived here quite late with a hand carrying a grocery bag. She was now making the preparations for Keika's clothes, and sighed satisfactorily when she was done, and began snapping photos of her, probably as a memorabilia.

That apron was probably specially modified for Keika's size; the applique and the name embroidered on it was very cute as well.

After taking countless photos of Keika, she seemed to remember that her own preparations were not yet complete.

"Th, that, I will be doing my preparations over that....."

She waved to me slightly in greeting, and spoke to me as though with some discretion.

Fumu. Although I didn't know what she had to leave this place to do her preparations, but girls will always have a lot of their own matters to attend to. If I were to pursue the matter further, it would only lead to anger. Komachi was proof of that. Furthermore, in this crowded place

that was full of dangerous cooking utensils, I would be worried even if she wasn't looking at them.

"Ah, don't worry, I will look after her."

"Well, then I will be....."

Saying that, Kawasaki nodded in reply and walked out of the cooking room.

I watched leave, then turned my attention to Keika.

Keika was probably tired from the day at the nursery, or perhaps she felt tired after having her photo taken countless times by Kawasaki. She seemed to be very tired, and her eyes were about to shut.

However, upon seeing me, she blinked her eyes repeatedly at me with her mouth agape.

"It's Ha-chan!"

Seems like she still remembered me, and so, she pointed a short finger at me using all her strength

"Oh, that's right, it's Ha-chan. Well, technically, my name is Hachiman. Also, don't point your finger at other. They will get pierced----"

I crouched down beside her and look at her, and at the same time extended my finger and poked her cheek. So soft, no way.....

I kept poking her cheek rapidly, and Keika kept making those queer 'Ou, ou' sounds like a seal, looking very confused. Umu, the punishment shall end here. She wouldn't be randomly pointing her fingers at other people from now on.

Although I had already achieved my objective, but the softness of her cheek made it really hard for me to put my finger away. Uh-oh, this was

bad, her cheek really was that soft..... Komachi had a period of time where her cheeks was this soft as well. No, it would still be that soft even today..... As I thought this, I resumed my continuous poking of her face. Keika still had a puzzled look on her face, but then with a 'Oh', she seemed to have thought of something.

"Ei."

With a shuuuu, she poked my face without any restraint.

"Ouch..... That's why I said don't point your fingers at others. It would be dangerous if you poked their eyes."

As a punishment, I began to poke her again. She probably felt that this was some sort of game, and with a laugh, began to poke my face back in return. U, Un..... seems like I failed in teaching her a lesson.

I continued to poke Keika's face, all the while pondering over how did it become like this, when suddenly, a cold voice could be heard from behind me.

".....Hey, what are you doing."

"Eh, no, nothing really."

Turning my head around, I saw Kawasaki in an apron. With a bowl and chopped chocolate in one hand, she was looking at me with an apathetic expression in her eyes. She took a deep breath, as though there was something that she found difficult to express in words.

"You know, although you were a great help in looking after her, but this is, this....."

"No, hold your horses. This is not what you think it is."

A dangerous looking male with rotten eyes poking a cute little girl's cheeks..... The impression that one got from this was sufficient to get me into trouble with the law. If this incident took place outside, I could see this incident being circulated around on notices, and my mom making fun of me "Isn't this you? Hahaha" to which I could only reply "O, Ah" helplessly..... Besides the above, Kawasaki's "I thought I trusted you....." gaze made me feel a queer sense of guilt in my chest.

"This is, well see....."

I stood up and raised both my hands, indicating that I have no intention to oppose, and considered what sort of justification that I could say next. Thereupon, I felt something slumping against my feet. Looking down, I saw that I was Keika hugging my waist.

"I was playing with Ha-chan~~"

"Un, well, yeah, something like that."

Although I had indeed wanted to play with her, but from another point of view, it was more like a young girl wanting to play with me. Ever since I was attracted by those cute soft cheeks of hers, I can hardly say that that sort of interpretation was hardly wrong.

To be able to grasp a guy's heart at such a young age, this kid sure is scary.....

Well, however, to anticipate this future prospect of hers was not wrong. In actuality, one could see that from her sister Kawasaki Saki as well, in general, she was a beauty. The only problem was that the first impression she gave was that of a Yankee. There was no trace of that intimidation or scariness in her eyes when she looked at her sister.

".....Is that so."

Seeing Keika's cherubic actions, Kawasaki seemed taken aback and smiled. Then, Keika smiled as well, and tilted her head, all the while clinging onto me.

"Want to play as well, Sa-chan?"

"No, no thanks. Ok Ke-chan, come over here."

Kawasaki pulled Keika away from me, and hugged her tightly. No, I wouldn't do anything to do her even if you weren't so cautious?

In any case, it seems like I manage to avoid getting into trouble this time. I heaved a sigh of relief.

However, compared to how relieved I was, Kawasaki seemed a little anxious. As she patted Keika's head, she looked towards the inside of the cooking room and began to speak.

"Is it really okay to bring her here?"

It's not like I didn't understand what she was so worried about. Afterall, everyone here was a high-school student, not to mention that there were people from another school as well. Keika would be a most unnatural presence amidst them. However, this event itself wasn't any official event, and so there weren't any clear rules to follow.

I looked at the nearby diagonal kitchen table, and saw Haruno-san talking over there with Meguri-senpai. If even that person was here, then there was no point in talking about participation criteria and the like anymore.

"Well, it's going to be alright. There are others here as well."

"Un....."

Hearing my words, Kawasaki nodded her head as though accepting what I had said. Well, first and foremost, the reason why this event could even take place was because of Kawasaki's request. If she was going to feel uncomfortable staying here, I would be most apologetic, because I would at least want to fulfill her request properly. Then again, originally, this wasn't part of the request but I will see what I can do to make her feel more at ease.

Just as I was searching around for the existence of those who could help accomplish this request, the sound of hurried footsteps could be heard coming from behind me.

"Oh, Kawasaki. You made it in time."

The cheerful voice belonged to Yuigahama, with Yukinoshita following behind her.

"I haven't see Keika in quite a while."

Saying that, Yuigahama too, began to pat Keika's head. Both she and Yukinoshita had seen Keika during the Christmas event, so they could be considered Keika's acquaintances.

Yukinoshita however, walked to Keika's side but her hand seemed to be hesitant in reaching out to her. She extended her hand a little then retracted it. Seems like she was worried about whether it would be all for her to pat Keika's head. So clumsy.

As I thought that, it seems like there was someone even clumsier.

"That..... Today, I look forward to working with your....."

Kawasaki seemed to be vexed at what sort of greetings she should give, and in the end, managed to utter those words shyly. Maybe she felt that was unbecoming of her sister, and so, Keika who was looking up at her sister, straightened her seating posture and bowed deeply.

“Please take care of me.”

She probably learnt that in nursery. Although she said those words slowly, but compared to her sister’s curt way of saying it, it still felt more amicable, and let those who see it be more at ease.

Not only me, but Yuigahama too was struck by her cuteness and writhing about going “Kya~”. Kawasaki’s eyes were moist, as though touched by her sister’s growth.

Thereupon, Yukinoshita too smiled with affection. She grasped her skirt and slowly squatted down, and looked at Keika directly and spoke slowly.

“I look forward to working with you as well. Well then, what sort of candy do you want to make?”

Having been asked such a question, Keika raised her head and looked at Kawasaki’s face, and Kawasaki nodded in reply.

“Ke-chan, what kind of sweets do you want to eat?”

Hearing this question, Keika seemed stunned for a short while, then spoke suddenly.

“Eel!”

“O, Oh..... I see.....”

I couldn’t think of anything else to say at that point in time. I see. Eel, is it?

“Sorry, our family had eel previously, and she really liked it.”

Kawasaki lowered her head, seemingly embarrassed. However, kids were all like that, and at times they will spout some nonsensical things, and other times they would say the very first thing that comes to mind without giving it further thought..... I really can't help but to take her response seriously.

As I thought that, Yukinoshita-san was instead placing her jaw between both her hands and seemed to be thinking about something seriously.

"If that's the case, then how about, eel pie? If it's pie alone, it's easy to do it, but as to the preparation and cooking of the eels, I will have to look it up....."

"Oh- can that pie really be made through normal means?"

"Yes."

Yukinoshita replied in a matter-of-fact manner. This girl really does know everything. Yet considering all that, it was strange that her own 'pie' was not made properly. (TL: Pie = pai = oppai = tits)

"If you don't mind, want to give it a try?"

Kawasaki's face was flushed a deep crimson as she shook her head at Yukinoshita's question.

"No, no need for that! Just teach her something that any kid could make....."

"Alright then, then something like chocolate truffle I guess..... Let me go collect some additional ingredients."

Saying that, Yukinoshita walked towards the teacher's desk at the front of the cooking room.

While waiting for her, I looked at Keika, wondering if I should continue to take care of her. However, it seems that this babysitting job was snatched away by Yuigahama.

Yuigahama took no notice of her skirt, and squatted down immediately and began to converse animatedly with Keika.

‘About eels, I know what you mean. I want to try them too~’

“Eels are delicious. Can be eaten together with rice and sauce.”

“I know right, eels are so tasty~”

“Un, rice is very nice.”

“Eh, rice.....”

Although the subject of their conversation was totally different, but the two of them seemed very happy. I mean, it would be trouble if Yuigahama were to really go and try (TL: to make the pie) it out.

However, it probably wouldn’t be a massive flop if Kawasaki and Yukinoshita were around. It seems that I, as a taste tester, has yet a need to make an appearance.

Well then, before my job starts, I guess I should go take a walk around.

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Under Yukinoshita’s guidance, Kawasaki and Keika began to prepare the chocolates. Now, there wasn’t even the job of looking after the kid. Thus, I was now a truly unemployed person. If this were to continue on,

I think I am going to pick up stones by the riverside and sell them. Eh wait, that's a [useless person].⁴⁴

Hayama, who was a taste-tester like me was still stuck between Miura and Isshiki, and Tobe who wanted to try and taste the food as well, was making a ruckus near Ebina-san. Dude, isn't it obvious you are being snubbed.

Haruno-san and Meguri-senpai was talking to Hiratsuka-sensei all this while. The current and old members of the student council was at various kitchen tables, taking down various orders, whereas the vice-president and secretary-chan was chatting away and laughing from time to time. Vice-president, go and do your job!

Kaihinsougou High school was having a DISCUSSION with Tamanawa at the center of it all. Seeing how they haven't really started their cooking, they were probably still in the midst of BRAINSTORMING.

Seeing that, I was really the only one not doing anything.

Anyway, I guess I should just stand at one corner and observe so as not to get in the way of others, when out of the corner of my eyes, I noticed the door of the cooking room being opened gently.

The person who opened it was perhaps observing the situation inside, as the door only opened a few centimeters before stopping.

What.....don't tell me that some other group who were using the communication center had come to complain that we were being too noisy.....

Seems like I was the only one who noticed the situation with the door, and so I had no choice but to go take a look.

⁴⁴ Old superstition in Japan, where they believe that said stones actually come from graves. Some think that it would be bad luck to pick them up, while others think that if you bring them to a shrine, you would be blessed with good fortune.

I walked to the door, but was a little hesitant.

It was going to be scary if it was some old auntie or someone like that..... If they are coming to come up and complain I am going to just apologize. Anyway, being scolded by people in society was a common fact of life. That is to say, being scolded could be said to be a job. Well, although there wasn't any salary in such a job. The Service Club has no wages for the entire year! Unpaid

As I steeled my resolve, I opened the door forcefully.

The person outside was someone I knew.

That person was probably on the way home after club activities, wearing a baggy windbreaker that was too big for him. Owing to the overly long sleeves, the hands that were unable to fully extend outside were now crossed in front of his chest in uncertainty. Was it because of the special aura that came about with this person? Because whenever he made this sort of pose with his back hunched-over, even the stiff material of his nylon shirt and coat become soft.

Then, his eyes met mine and his face beamed.

"Hachiman!"

"To, Totsuka..... I see that you came."

"Un, although I am a little late cause I was held back by club activities."

The one standing in front of the door was my classmate, Totsuka Saika. Although I did tell him about today's event when I met him in school, I didn't really expect him to come.

"That's great, I thought I had gotten the wrong location."

As he said that, he looked towards the group of Kaihinsougou High students. I see, he would be able to see only them if he opened the door by that little amount.

Yup, if your vision is too narrow, you would be unable to see other things.

For example, the existence of this fellow standing behind Totsuka.

“Ha-----chiman-----”

The person who was standing behind Totsuka was my..... was my what..... Well, let's just say he's my partner during sports class. My sports class partner, Zaimokuza Yoshiteru. Although I clearly did not meet him in school, not to mention that I didn't even tell him about today, then why was he here? If it's why, then probably it's because he's Zaimokuza. It's bad if you take too much notice of the finer happenings.

“So, Zaimokuza? What are you doing here? Getting ready to go back?”

Hearing me ask that, Zaimokuza gave a fake cough.

“Ahem. Ahem. First of all, Totsuka and I were asked by Hiratsuka-sensei to run an errand for her, therefore, we cannot go back yet.”

“An errand? Are you still not going back yet?”

“That's why I said, I am not going back yet.”

He was waving his hands in front of his chest, whilst replying me in some unrecognizable dialect. Come to think of it, what is Hiratsuka-sensei's errand..... As I was thinking about this, Totsuka unslung his bag from his back.

“That, she wanted us to bring this here.....”

With that said, Totsuka began to rummage through his bag.

“Oh oh, you guys are here, you guys didn’t have trouble bringing it here right?”

Hiratsuka-sensei seemed to have discovered the situation by the door and hence had walked over. Totsuka was still searching in his bag, with a puff and a smile, passed something to Hiratsuka-sensei.

“Here. Please take this.”

The thing that Totsuka passed Hiratsuka-sensei, seemed to be several refrigerated bags that the supermarket would give you for purchasing frozen foodstuffs. After receiving those bags that were emitting a silver glow, Hiratsuka-sensei gave her thanks whilst confirming the contents of the bag.

“What’s inside?”

“Un. Ah, you came at the right moment. Please spread these out over there.”

As I asked my question, Hiratsuka-sensei was picking up the bags and walking towards the window of the cooking room. She grasped a chair beside her, and seemed to be in a good mood as she hummed a song and began taking out the contents of the bag.

“I thought that everyone would like to eat these afterwards. Anyway, I bought these as a sort of reference material as well and accidentally bought too much of them, but I was able to meet them when I went out and so I sought their help to bring it over.”

“I see.”

During this period of time, whether it was the greengrocer, the department stores or even the mail order, you could buy branded

chocolates from all of them. Hiratsuka-sensei had probably used some of these stores' services and had gotten Zaimokuza and Totsuka to go and collect them on her behalf.

However, what Hiratsuka-sensei had ordered was no small amount. She took out a great assortment of said chocolate from the refrigerated bags that had the store's name printed on it.

These high-class chocolates that kept spreading across the tabletop drew the attention of others, and I could feel the glances that were coming my way.

Amongst them, Haruno-san had a knack for eating. Accompanying her was Meguri-senpai, and Haruno-san was looking at the chocolates one by one with a deep interest.

"Eh, Shizuka-chan, you really went all out—Godiva is a given, there's also Pierreherme, as well as Charbonnel..... There's also those from Imperial Hotel, New Otani hotel..... Ah, there are chocolates made by Sadohari Aoki too---"

"Ah, yes that's about it."

Hiratsuka-sensei puffed out her chest proudly, probably because someone understood the value of those chocolates.

Actually, from my point of view, I was thinking something like "Aren't they all just chocolates?" However this was something who had experience with chocolates would know about. I have heard of Godiva chocolates, so I guess the rest were probably an assortment of branded chocolates as well. Was that French that Haruno-san was speaking just now? Is it? Well, I don't know.

What did she say just now again? Something like Pi, Pier..... Pierretaki? Janpiero.....porunarefu? I really couldn't wrap my head around those names, but I just knew that they were all branded chocolates.

Opening those fashionable packaging, one could see the gorgeous chocolates lined up neatly in rows just like the display in a jewelry shop window. Seeing all these, Meguri-senpai couldn't help but give a sigh of admiration.

"Wa--, looks delicious."

"Ah, Meguri knows as well? This is really tasty, I recommend all of these as well."

"Wait a minute, why do you look so proud, Haruno? All these were chosen by me."

Seeing how Haruno-san was saying all these so proudly caused Hiratsuka to reply unhappily to her.

As expected of Shizuka-chan who took great pride in her own interest..... Her car seems to be of the high-end as well..... Towards her own likes and hobbies, she would willingly pour in her own passion and money in it. This sort of man-like behavior, amazing.

As a male myself, towards this display of extravagance by her towards her likes and interests caused me to look at her with a newfound sense of respect. Totsuka too, was staring at Hiratsuka-sensei.

"Sensei, so you eat sweet stuffs as well?"

Seeing Totsuka's sparkling eyes, Hiratsuka-sensei seemed to be temporarily at a loss for words.

".....Well, something like that. Don, Don't tell me that this doesn't suit me?"

"Ah, no, nothing like that..... I think that it suits sensei!"

Seeing Sensei drooping her shoulders, Totsuka became flustered and tried to smooth it over. Seeing all these, Haruno-san on the other hand, laughed happily.

“For Shizuka-chan, she probably eats it along with alcohol. Sounds great~ I too, want to eat these tasty chocolates as I drink alcohol.”

“Indeed, I do eat chocolates with alcohol..... However, I can’t do that today.

Hiratsuka scowled at her, to which Haruno-san seemed dissatisfied, and pouted.

Watching their interactions, I felt surprised.

In truth, Yukinoshita Haruno was the sort of person who did things with a purpose, as well as one who commonly made a mockery out of others. But now, her response towards Hiratsuka-sensei seemed completely natural, at least, that’s what I thought. Of course, this could be a special ability of her strong exterior appearance.

Yet, it could be said that I knew next to nothing about Yukinoshita Haruno. Yukinoshita’s elder sister, Hayama’s childhood friend, Meguri-senpai’s senpai, a former student of Hiratsuka-sensei, a superdemon with a perfect exterior appearance. Even if I knew all these superficial facts about her, I still couldn’t peer through the murky, bottomless marsh to get a peek at her true nature.

Thinking about it carefully, this was the first time I had seen Haruno-san spending a long time conversing with someone older than her.

I was somewhat taken aback, and kept looking in the direction of Haruno-san, all the while thinking that the water surface of that bottomless lake was being distorted gently.

She deliberately drooped her shoulders, and Haruno-san proceeded to lie flat on the kitchen table, and looked at Hiratsuka-sensei sweetly.

“That’s a pity then. Next time, bring me out with you~ there’s so many things that I want to talk to you about.”

That was just a casual lip service.

However, Hiratsuka looked at her seriously in return.

She ceased her unwrapping of the chocolates, and clasped her hands together. Slowly, she looked at Haruno-san’s eyes as she crafted some words and spoke gently.

“Haruno, if you..... really do have something you wish to tell me, I can entertain you anytime.”

The instant she had said her piece, Haruno-san’s shoulders shook ever so slightly.

She was still lying flat on the kitchen table, and the eyes that were looking at Hiratsuka-sensei was like glass-works, devoid of any color. However, in that instant, I thought I saw a pale flame flash across her eyes.

Although that instant lasted less than a second, but the time that the two spent looking at each other felt very long, to the extent that I had even forgotten to breathe.

The silence was broken by the sound of Haruno-san’s laughter escaping from the side of her mouth.

“Really? Then you’d best schedule your time----- Ah, Hikigaya-kun is here too? Come and drink with the big sisters~”

Jesting, she intentionally shifted her body towards me, and looked up at me. Immediately, I moved myself away to increase the distance between us.

“I am still not of age yet. I can’t drink alcohol, how about orange juice instead.”

Zaimokuza laughed derisively. Hiratsuka lost the serious edge from just now, and her shoulders shook from the laughter.

Seeing that my joke was effective against the two of them, in other words, it was useless against the others.

Totsuka had a “And so?” expression as he tilted his head, whereas Meguri-senpai continued to smile with an expression that she didn’t quite understand what was going on. Haruno-san frowned and shook her head.

“It’s too bad if you can’t drink. Well whatever, can’t be helped since you aren’t of age, how about Meguri?”

“Haru-san, I am still not of age yet~ But it’s ok if we go for tea.....”

“I see. Ehh, what should I do then? Find my classmates?”

Hiratsuka-sensei watched Haruno-san picked up her mobile phone and seemed to be dialing some numbers on it, and she sighed deeply.

“Well, if you want to, just call me.”

With that, it signaled the end of the subject, and Hiratsuka-sensei pushed a bag of a seemingly famous brand of chocolates in my direction.

“Hikigaya, Shiromeguri, both of you take it and split it amongst yourself as you see fit. Also, take the rest and give it to everyone here as well.”

“Okay. Um, how many should I give to each person?”

As Meguri-senpai answered as such, she placed the chocolates on the paper plates next to her.

“Whatever you deem fit.” Although Hiratsuka-sensei gave her such an answer, Meguri-senpai looked up in vexation.

“Well then, Hikigaya-kun, I will leave this to you.”

As she said that, she passed me a couple of the paper plates. It looks like this was the result of Meguri-senpai’s meticulous distributions of the chocolates. In each of the plates were an assortment of multi-colored chocolates and different brand of chocolates. All in all, they were distributed quite evenly throughout.

I was in awe of the Meguri-power(star) in spite of myself, coming from Meguri-senpai standing beside me, looking quite proud of herself.

“Understood.”

“Un, let’s get started then, everyone.”

Meguri-senpai picked up a few paper plates as well, and everyone began to walk towards the various kitchen tables. Even though I might say that, but we didn’t really spread ourselves out. Generally speaking, we just split into three directions.

Meguri-senpai was heading in the direction of Kaihinsougou High and the student council. Totsuka was heading in the direction of the Kawasaki sisters, Yukinoshita and Yuigahama whilst Zaimokuza seemed to trailing behind Totsuka’s shadow.

That means, the only kitchen table that was left for me was the one where Miura and Isshiki were fiercely duking it out.

I observed their situation from afar; Miura was glaring pointedly at Isshiki, Isshiki was grinning from ear to ear and Hayama, who was stuck between the two, was maintaining his refreshing smile the whole time.

Tobe seemed to be quite concerned about Hayama's situation, and would often throw in a word or two, and doesn't seem to be trying to appeal to Ebina-san.

Un..... Seems like big trouble. I mean, I didn't want to join in the fray at all.

I approached their table slowly, all the while thinking of what I ought to say when Hayama seemed to have noticed my approach.

"Sorry, excuse me for a bit."

With that, he smoothly extricated himself from Miura and Isshiki and walked towards me.

"Is something the matter?"

"Ah, ah. Just here to bring some refreshments from Hiratsuka-sensei."

As I explained, I passed him the paper plate in my hand, only to see Hayama's expression darken.

"Chocolates again.....?"

"Seems to be quite tasty ones."

".....Is that so?"

With a short reply, he took the paper plates from me and walked back swiftly to the kitchen table.

My mission was now completed without a hitch. Just as I was thinking to go back since I had done what I was supposed to do, I heard the light sound of metal behind me.

I looked in the direction of the noise, and saw that the noise was caused by Hayama flicking his finger against a coffee can. He was waving two coffee cans about, and with his smile, asked me wordlessly if I would care to have a can.

Well, I guess that even Hayama would be more or less tired after having to put up with both Miura and Isshiki for so long. Perhaps he wanted to use me as an excuse to take a break from them. In any case, I wasn't doing anything anyway.

With a 'Oh', I nodded my head slightly and Hayama took a seat at a kitchen table nearby Miura. I followed his suggestion and moved a seat there as well.

When I sat down, Hayama placed a can of coffee in front of me. The brand showed that it wasn't MAX coffee, but BLACK coffee. Seeing me look at the brand name again and again, Hayama gave a bitter smile.

"You want it to be sweeter?"

"Not really."

Even I, had no interest in drinking something sweet now. Besides, I still had to eat chocolate after this. I opened the can of coffee, and drank it in big gulps/

Hayama did the same as well, and with a 'Fuuuuuuuuuuuu' exhaled greatly.

There wasn't any sort of conversation between us, just the sound of coffee cans hitting the table as well as the occasional sighs that escaped

our mouth. This sounds of this exchange replaced any possible conversation and continued on intermittently.

From the weight on my hand, I knew that I was nearly done drinking the can, when Hayama suddenly said, "Even so."

"I thought about it properly as well."

"Huh?"

My reply to him was serious, as I really had no idea as to what he was trying to tell me. However, he gave his usual Hayama Hayato-like smile that everyone was familiar with and continued on gently.

"If it's like this, then everyone..... everyone can behave more naturally that way."

Saying that, he took a glance round the cooking room. Following his gaze, I could see all sorts of things happening around me.

Miura who was looking at the weighing scales seriously, or Isshiki who was whistling as she operated the oven, or Yuigahama whose face was flushed pink as well as Yukinoshita who was hugging her head as she watched Yuigahama.

Soon, Hayama's gaze returned to me again. That expressions that he now had was one that I knew fairly well, a lonely bittersweet smile that was characteristic of Hayama Hayato.

The 'everyone' that Hayama spoke of.

Who was he referring to? And who was included in this 'everyone' that he keeps referring to? I noticed this faintly and averted my gaze from Hayama, and took a sip from the bitter coffee.

I had no response to his soliloquy, and Hayama added in another sentence suddenly again.

“It’s all thanks to you, that Tobe could get to eat chocolates and feel happy.”

Hayama was saying this with a fair deal of jest. From his words, Tobe seemed to have managed to eat Ebina-san’s chocolates that were still works in progress. He was being quite noisy his with exclamations of [Delicious!], [So sweet!] and [Awesome!]. Oh, you did try your best once. But still, Ebina-san is one of those type of girls that were way more trouble than they look on the surface. To these type of people, they will only open their hearts in stages. Or perhaps, a mental make-up was just structured like that. I too, gave a wry smile thinking about it.

However, well, at least till now, I should at least congratulate Tobe for trying till now. Although, that’s just my style of saying it.

“I don’t really care about the chocolates or Tobe..... Especially Tobe.”

“Haha, that’s so mean.”

Hayama laughed, then downed the rest of the bitter coffee, and shook it as though wanting me to confirm whether it was really empty. He stood up casually and prepared to throw away his empty can. Perhaps Miura had seen his actions, because she was now calling out to him in a sweet voice.

“Hayato~~~~~”

“I will be right there.”

With that reply, Hayama turned his head back the last time, to give a short and simple goodbye, before walking back to the kitchen table where they were waiting for him.

I watched him leave and raise the empty can once more to my mouth.

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The confection making had already entered the climax.

Those that worked the fastest had already put their dough into the oven, or already putting the finished product into the fridge to chill, and were now advancing towards the final step.

Even Haruno-san, who kept talking non-stop, seemed to have at some point in time, completed most of the work. Not only that, Meguri-senpai as well as the previous student council that were under her charge had also more or less finished too. The only thing left for them seemed to be setting the shape as well as decorations and toppings for it.

Just how good was this person at multitasking exactly? As always, she seemed to always able to do those sorts of things that was quite impossible for humans to understand. In all aspects of the word.....

However, she was probably getting tired of looking after others, for she was now leisurely enjoying a cup of tea with Yukinoshita.

“Yukino-chan, what are you making? Let your Onee-chan have a taste~”

Haruno-san’s insistent voice was completely ignored by Yukinoshita. Yukinoshita was now supervising Miura and Yuigahama.

Under Yukinoshita’s watchful eyes, Miura was molding the dough into shape with a serious look, whereas Yuigahama was shaping the mold with another piece of dough.

She was probably displeased with how Yukinoshita ignored her, and so her tone changed to one that was pouting, and spoke again to Yukinoshita.

“Hey, Yukino-chan, can you hear me~”

“.....Haruno0san, Yukinoshita-san is still quite busy.”

Seeing this situation, Hayama had a wry smile, and walked up to Haruno-san’s side as though wanting to try and dissuade her. If the surroundings were going to be that noisy, Miura would probably get distracted. Maybe Hayama said such things because he felt concerned about this as well.

Those who were focused on their work were not only Miura and Yuigahama, Isshiki was squeezing out the fresh cream, and were doing some sort of cute decoration, devoting herself to it. Amongst the Kawasaki sisters, Keika’s face was full of chocolate, but she did succeed in making something that sort of resembled a chocolate truffle, which Kawasaki was busy taking photos of. Oi, you, how many are you going to take.....

As everyone focus on doing their own things, my job as a taste-tester was probably about to begin as well. As I thought that, I watched from the sidelines, maintaining my ‘Not going to be a bother’ pose. Thereupon, Orimoto came running my way, and spoke to me, who had currently nothing to do.

“Hikigaya, are there still spare chocolate cutters?”

“Oh, oh oh..... just wait a bit.”

Seems like the progress over at Kaihinsougou High was not bad as well. Although they had kept arguing over how they wanted the end-product to look like, it looks like they were gradually inching closer to completion.

As I told her to wait, I walked over to Yukinoshita.

“Excuse me, are there still spare chocolate cutters?”

“There’s still some over there, you may take those if you need them.”

“Oh, thanks.”

And so, the one answered her wasn’t me.

It was Orimoto Kaori who had followed me here.

Yukinoshita looked surprised at the figure of Orimoto who had suddenly appeared and became quiet. Yuigahama raised her head and looked on with a curious expression, probably because Yukinoshita’s instructional voice had suddenly disappeared.

Amongst the Kaihinsougou high crowd, a particular person wearing the Kaihinsougou High uniform stood out a little more from the less. Although there were a couple of people looking at her, Orimoto didn’t seem to really mind them, and was now scrutinizing the chocolate cutters one by one. Then, she spoke something casually.

“.....Come to think of it, have I ever given some to Hikigaya?”

Her tone suggested that she really had no idea which made me smile bitterly. You don’t remember? Well, that’s to be expected.

Although Orimoto was the type who would give obligatory chocolate to whoever it was as long as they asked, I somehow did not fall under that category of ‘whoever’.

How did I accept that reality last time..... I reminisced about that and my reply came slightly late.

I coughed a little to make up for the silence, when I suddenly heard the sound of ‘Ka-cha, Ka-cha’ sound of tableware. I took a look and saw that It was Yukinoshita holding her jaw with her hand as she looked at me, Yuigahama had averted her gaze and her hands were moving about in

circles, Isshiki went 'Eh' and nodded her head as though interested in the topic, Kawasaki was looking at me with a somewhat shocked expression, Tamanawa coughed and went 'Fuuu, fuuuu' as he blew he fringe. Tamanawa-san, you are a little noisy, you know.....

"No, ...probably never."

I tried not to let that memory reside within me and answered as naturally as I could. To that, Orimoto laughed ever so naturally as well.

"I see, then I will give you some this year."

"Eh, no, a, that's....."

Those unexpected words of her easily collapsed the façade that I was maintaining, and my words came out in a fluster.

No, perhaps this was my true natural response..... What's this, am I really that disgusting?

"Then, remember to come eat it when I am done."

After saying like that so simply, Orimoto picked up the chocolate cutter and walked back to her kitchen table.

Having heard what she said, I couldn't just reject her without any reason, but maybe that was just lip service from her..... I watch her leave as I pondered over her words endlessly.

Well, this was definitely Orimoto's unique ability to be able to say anything so casually, and that there was no deeper meaning hidden behind them. Finally, I don't have to read between the lines of someone's words, nor would I misunderstand their intentions and just accept the words as they are. Thinking of this, I couldn't help but smile and sigh as well.

I carried with me a small sense of satisfaction and turned my head back at the kitchen table, and my eyes met with Haruno-san, who was standing by the window.

Haruno-san seemed to have been watching our exchange with a great smile on her face. Her expression seemed to suggest that she had spotted something fun to toy with.

Then, her expression changed from the soft smile to a sadistic one. The corners of her mouth curled upwards, and her eyes that were now narrowed had a sharp edge to them. Haruno-san looked at Hayama who was beside her.

“Let me see, Hayato seemed to have receive some chocolate from Yukino-chan some time ago?”

Although she was talking to Hayama, the truth is that the voice could be heard by everyone present.

Yukinoshita who had been ignoring her all this time seemed to have reacted to it. She looked at Haruno-san with a confused expression and glared at her without saying anything.

Those who couldn't find their voice was not only Yukinoshita, but also Miura. Even Isshiki shrieked softly.

I scratched my head briskly as I smiled bitterly. There was no need at all to say this in front of both Miura and Isshiki. But what was surprisingly, was that my hands had somehow become fists at some point in time. It's going to be hard to comb my hair like that.....

Yukinoshita did not deny Haruno-san's words, and looked at me with a troubled look in her eyes. Her expression seemed to suggest that she felt troubled because she didn't know what to do at having the past suddenly brought up. She bit her lips lightly, and her eyes betrayed a sense of the unease she was in.

However, I probably had a similar expression as well. The discomfort I felt was as though I had phlegm stuck in my throat, or the insides of my stomach crawling about due to indigestion.

Yukinoshita lowered her head, and I averted my eyes as well. In front of me, I could see Yuigahama's uneasy expression as she seemed to be quite worried about us.

A short silence. Still, it felt as though a long period of time had passed. I wanted to say something to break this silence, but I couldn't find anything appropriate to say.

"Ah, that's true, that's probably during elementary school or so. Haruno-san received some as well."

The person who gave such a correct answer under this sort of situation, was of course Hayama.

Hayama answered with an ever so magnificent, refreshing smile on his face, and dodged the question. Hearing that, Haruno-san seemed to be a little let-down.

Hearing his answer, Miura looked relieved, and Isshiki heaved a sigh of relief as well.

Yet, in contrast to their reaction, Yukinoshita Haruno's expression seemed to grow even colder. She glanced at Hayama with a disinterested look, and left the window side as though she was bored with the development. Hayama watched her leave with a lonely look in his eyes.

Haruno-san stopped by Yukinoshita's side.

"Then, Yukino-chan, who are you planning to give this to?"

Her voice seemed to suggest that she was just joking with her. If one did not have a good understanding of the two of them, it would surely have sounded like some cute teasing between the two sisters. In actuality, Yukinoshita who looked away with a “Hnng”, seemed to be just a playful sulk from her in response to her sister’s teasing.

“.....This has nothing to do with Nee-san.”

“Eh, you are not going to give your Onee-chan?”

Haruno-san laughed softly, and hearing her joking tone, Yukinoshita glared at her, seemingly a little angry.

“Of course not. There’s absolutely no reason for me to do that, not to mention that I have never received chocolates from Nee-san even until today.”

“Uh, that’s indeed true.”

Haruno-san nodded her head, indicating her understanding, and then, she smiled bitterly as she sighed.

“Well, Yukino-chan say she wouldn’t be giving me and so she definitely won’t be doing so. She has never lied after all.”

This point was very close to my impression of Yukinoshita in the past. However, Yukinoshita Haruno definitely had a greater understanding of her than I had in the past.

“But, there are still times when she wouldn’t say the truth.”

Haruno-san was looking at Yukinoshita coldly as she said that, a great change from her previous warm and cheerful gaze.

“You didn’t say that you were not going to give it to anyone. That means you are indeed going to give it to someone.”

Yukinoshita maintained her silence and continued to glare at Haruno-san coldly. Although I saw her accepting her sister's conclusion, but the smile on Haruno-san's face did not change.

"Well, but the people to whom Yukino-chan can give chocolates to are very limited."

"Asinine. Whatever you say."

Yukinoshita discontinued the conversation, and once again, began to work.

She reached her hands out towards the empty bowl and tray in front of her, and began to keep them, deliberately making "Ka-cha, Ka-cha" noises as she did so.

The exchange between the Yukinoshita sisters had finally come to an end, and the cooking room resumed its usual clamorous state. This clamorous atmosphere gave everyone present a sense of peace and calm.

Just as I sighed in relief, I heard a loud clanging noise. Looking in the direction of that noise, I saw a metallic bowl spinning on the floor, spinning towards me. Accompanying the ringing sound of the bowl, was a small voice.

"Sor, sorry."

Yukinoshita lowered her head, her face a shade of red all the way till the tip of her ears, and she came running over to pick up the bowl.

This sort of mediocre mistake was really rare ; As I thought so, I squatted down to pick up the bowl that had come spinning to me.

Thereupon, I locked eyes with Yukinoshita, who had also squatted down to pick up the bowl. Both of us extended our hands, and froze in that posture, searching for hints as to who would be one to pick it up

We looked at each other, separated by just a few centimeters. Yukinoshita hurriedly retracted her hand that was so close to touching mine.

What are you so agitated about? Seeing you like that will make me agitated too as well.

“That.....”

I looked away from her, and left the job to her as I tried to apologize.

Yukinoshita picked up the bowl in a hurry.

However, probably because of her unstable grasp of the bowl as she picked it up, the rim of the bowl that was still in contact with the floor once more made its annoying ringing noise and rolled someplace else.

The noise made by it continued to reach my ears, and even if it finally stopped moving, that noise would still be stuck inside my head.

It was not until when someone picked up the bowl gently, did that noise finally cease.

I raised my head, and saw Yuigahama spinning the bowl on her fingers, puffing out her chest with pride.

“Hehe, Yukinon, you still need have quite some way to go. My ability in handling metals bowl and cooking equipment is top-notch.”

Seeing her laugh like that as she said it, I sighed with relief. The thing that had been stuck in my chest seemed to have disappeared as well. I said a few words and stood up at last.

“.....No, apart from this, everything else is a fatal flaw.”

“That is indeed so. Thank you.”

Yukinoshita too, had a smile on her face, and with her thanks, extended her hand to take the bowl from Yuigahama. Yuigahama nodded her head with an "Un" and passed the bowl back to her. Yuigahama had a somewhat lonely expression, and looking at her now empty palm, clenched her hand into a fist.

That action caused me some degree of concern, and I looked at her for a while. When and where have I seen that expression before?

Exactly when was that? As I searched my memories, I sat down on the chair by the wall.

Just as I let out yet another sigh, I seemed to feel that somewhere, someone was gently laughing away.

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The sweet fragrance had already begun to spread about the cooking room.

Several people stood in front of the oven, all waiting anxiously for the product to be completed. Miura, who was amongst them, stood out from the rest. She was looking intently at the glass window of the oven.

When they were all baked, it would then be time for taste testing. I too, could finally strip myself of the label of being an ‘unemployed person’, and begin doing my job.

Just as I was resting at a place nearby the oven, getting to recharge my energy, I felt someone tap my back.

Turning my head round, I saw Hiratsuka-sensei standing there. The paper plates that she was holding in her hand were probably the extra chocolates.

“It’s a really nice event.”

As she talked to me, she pulled a chair near me and sat down, and held out the paper plate of chocolate to me. I took one from it and began to eat, then replied.

“Haa, although this event is pretty nonsensical.”

In fact, I couldn’t really tell if this could even be considered an ‘event’. This was just gathering people from all walks of life, where everyone would then proceed to do the things that they want to do, or so I felt.

Hiratsuka-sensei seemed to understand what I was getting at, and chuckled happily. Then, she looked at the students in the cooking room warmly.

“That is fine. From the start, you are a nonsensical person anyway. The people associated with you are as such as well. For it to become like this, that is to be expected.”

“Nonsensical……. Isn’t that a little mean?”

“Well, compared to the past. I guess I can understand you a little better now.”

Hiratsuka-sensei gave a broad smile as though teasing me, and began to eat the chocolates as well.

“People’s perception of others continues to be renewed day after day. If you continue to spend time with them, and grow together with them, you will gradually get to know them.”

"I don't really feel like we've grown though. We keep doing the same things over and over again."

"Even so, there will be more or less some changes."

Hiratsuka conversed with me as she continued eating her chocolates. She swallowed the chocolate and proceeded to wipe her mouth with her finger. This action was sexy, or rather, youth-like. I laughed unintentionally.

Indeed, my impression of Hiratsuka-sensei had sort of gradually changed. Hence, other people's perception of me would have more or less changed a little as well.

However, towards this sort of change, I harbored a sort of fear, the type that was hard to put in words.

"Change, that huh..... To hear it mentioned like that, gives me a sort of weird feeling."

"A strange feeling?"

Hiratsuka cocked her head and observed me. I felt embarrassed and turned my face away, and hurriedly continue on with what I wanted to say.

"Ah, something like discomfort and unease?"

After saying it out, I felt an unexpected sense of satisfaction.

That was something that had always been bugging me.

That feeling would strike me unexpectedly at times; that feeling was somewhat different from what I had always felt.

When I interacted with those people, a doubt would surge forth from the depths of my heart as I questioned myself, "Was this really right?"

"Unease, huh..... I hope that you will never forget that feeling."

Hiratsuka-sensei was staring into the distance, and spoke in a tone that seemed like she was reminiscing of something. Although the target of her words was me, she seemed to be saying that to someone else as well.

However, as expected, she was instead talking to me, and her gaze returned back to me.

"This is probably what they deem as signs of growing up. When you become an adult, you will often gloss over such things. That's why, right now, I wish that you would take a closer look at this 'unease' that you are feeling. This is extremely important."

"But there's a saying that says that important things can't be seen."

I said that on purpose to poke fun at what she said, to which Hiratsuka-sensei chuckled.

"You are not meant to see it with your eyes. You are supposed to look at it with your heart."

"Don't think, feel. That sort of meaning? I don't have that sort of force." ⁴⁵

What was this person talking about..... Was she just saying this for the sake of being able to say some lines from a shounen manga..... I looked at her with that sort of expression, and Hiratsuka coughed intentionally, probably from embarrassment.

"Just the opposite. Don't feel, think."

⁴⁵ From Bruce Lee.

Hiratsuka-sensei who repeated her words once more, no longer had a joking expression on her face, her eyes were filled with kindness and sincerity. Slowly, quietly, she continued to convey her intentions to me.

“Towards this sense of unease, please, always continue to think about it.”

“Always?”

I repeated that word, trying to digest the meaning of it completely. Hiratsuka-sensei nodded her head in reply.

“Un. Always. If you do, you will definitely be able to understand it one day. People don’t look back to see how much distance they have covered when they are walking. In fact, from the viewpoint of those who have stopped walking, the more they progress, the more they feel betrayed.”

Hiratsuka spoke until here, and took one more look at the people in this room one by one.

“Right now, I am glad to be able to see this sort of scene up close.”

Saying that, Hiratsuka-sensei stood up.

“.....After all, I can’t watch over you guys forever.”

Hearing that sort of voice, I looked at her, and saw Hiratsuka-sensei flexed her shoulders, and stretched herself lazily, making it impossible to take a peek at the expression on her face.

I turned my head once more to look at her, and she had already returned to being the Hiratsuka-sensei that I had always known.

“Alright, it’s about time for me to get back to my work.”

“Aren’t you going to stay behind a little and try some?”

“No, there are still some things that I need to attend to..... It’s quite close to March now, so I think I want to get it done as quickly as possible.”

Hiratsuka-sensei let loose a loud laugh. Then, she raised her hand to bid me farewell and walked away. Following the sound of her high-heels, Hiratsuka-sensei left the room jauntily.

Watching her leave, I put another chocolate into my mouth.

The chocolate that I had picked at random began to dissolve in my mouth, just like the words of sensei, leaving a faint bitter aftertaste in my mouth.

Chapter 6

[The genuine article that he seeks is still out of his grasp and he continues to mistakes what’s real.]

The oven and the kitchen timer rang out in quick succession, emitting a piercing sound. Each time they sounded out, the cooking room would be filled with both sighs and cheers, and the air would be filled with a sweet and fragrant smell.

Looking at the crowd of people who had gathered in front of the oven, it looks like Miura’s masterpiece, which she poured her heart and soul into making, was completed without any issues.

Miura opened the over door carefully, and from it, took out a chocolate gateau before quickly bringing it to Yukinoshita.

Yukinoshita began to inspect Miura’s work. In the time of one, two breaths, she observed it slowly and carefully. Miura, who was beside her was restless, whereas Yuigahama who was nearby as well, seemed to be tenterhooks.

Before long, Yukinoshita looked up at them after taking a short breath.

“.....It looks fine to me. I think it’s been done quite beautifully.”

Hearing Yukinoshita’s words, Miura heaved a sigh of relief and her shoulders relaxed.

“Yumiko is amazing!”

Yuigahama hugged Miura and Miura’s face relaxed as well.

“Un. Thank you, Yui..... Yu, Yukinoshita-san as well.”

Her face was faced towards the side, but her eyes kept glancing at Yukinoshita. What a strange way to express her thanks, her reply too, was strange as well.

“I haven’t tasted it yet so I can’t really comment much. But for now, it seems to be a pass.”

Can’t she just give an honest thanks in return, this girl..... However, what Yukinoshita said was not wrong. Today’s events was not simply to teach others how to makes confections.

“Yumiko.”

As though wanting to give her courage, Yuigahama gently patted Miura’s shoulders.

Being urged on like that, Miura forgot to take off her mittens and carried the chocolate gateau away as though it was some valuable item. Then, she walked in front of Hayama and twisted her body awkwardly as though she was embarrassed and spoke.

“Ha, Hayato..... This, could you help me..... to taste it?”

Seeing her unable to look at him directly, and seeing her steal occasional glances at him, Hayama replied her with a composed smile.

“Of course. If you think I am suited for this.”

“Un..... Un.”

Miura seems to be searching for something that she ought to say, but in the end, all she managed was a deep blush as she nodded her head several times.

Seems like she’s really trying her best, I thought as I clapped my hands in my heart. Meanwhile, someone beside me was moaning.

“Mumumu.....”

“What are you moaning about?”

I glanced at Isshiki, only to see give Miura a hateful gaze. In her hands was a beautifully wrapped baked sweet, complete with a message card that she already made.

She was holding on to it tightly.

“That seems to be a nice cake, Miura-senpai.”

“Ah, that chocolate gateau turned out pretty well, much to my surprise.”

Hearing that, Isshiki went “Haa?” and looked at me dubiously. Can you not look at me with that ‘What on earth is this girl talking about?’ kind of look?

Isshiki pretended to cough, then began to explain what she meant with gestures.

“No, no, I don’t mean that. I am talking about the gap, the gap. How can she change her normally ‘bad-girl’ attitude to something so cute all of a sudden? That’s super unfair, isn’t it?”

“Ah, ah, that.....”

As expected of this master of slyness. Speaking of Miura, she probably wouldn’t resort to something like this. This was simply a display of a young maiden. Isshiki seemed to have understood this point as well and she rambled on, “Her personality doesn’t seem that bad actually.” I agree, but your personality on the other hand, is pretty bad though.

Although she kept on grumbling, but once she was done with it, she seemed contented and smiled all of a sudden.

“Well, but this makes it all the more fun to compete with. After all, some people aren’t even worth competing with.”

Saying that, she sighed as though disappointed by something and then said, “Ah, that’s it” like she just thought of something and proceeded to take out something from her apron pocket after fumbling about a bit, and then with a ‘Poi’, threw it at me.

“Senpai, please accept this.”

Taking it, I took a look at it. It was a small vinyl bag that contained cookies. Besides a small ribbon, there didn’t seem to be any other sort of decoration on it. It was a world of difference from the luxurious and gorgeous looking set of baked sweets that Isshiki was holding.

“What, are you giving this to me? Thank you?”

It was given to me so casually that I didn’t know how to really express my thanks.

She was going on about how giving obligatory chocolate was important and something about men's pride. Well, what do you know, her character wasn't so bad after all! I am sorry for saying that you had a bad personality just now?

Hearing my apology, Isshiki laughed all of a sudden and then she placed her thumb gently against in front of my lips.

".....Keep this a secret from others, okay?"

A devilish smile appeared on her face. Then, she winked at me and said, "It would be a bother if people know about it~" before walking away. Seems like she was walking towards Hayama.

As for me, I was rooted to the spot, stunned by Isshiki's antics and her expression just now. She was no longer being sly, in fact, she was being quite scary..... If I was the past me, I would have fallen for her right away in that instant.

As I trembled with fear at my sly Kouhai's destructive power, I took a look at her, to watch her put in her best effort against Hayama.

Issihiki looked at Hayama with upturned eyes as she went Kyarurun~ as she passed him the baked sweets. ⁴⁶

"Hayama-senpai, please taste this as well."

"Haha, can I finish them all?"

Although Hayama was still eating Miura's chocolate gateau, he gave Isshiki an invigorating smile as welcomed Isshiki's advances maturely.

And so, once again, he found himself stuck between Miura and Isshiki.

⁴⁶ Catchphrase of Makoto Kikuchi from Idolmaster.

Then, with some crunching noises, Tobe walked towards Hayama whilst feasting away on some checkered cookies and he gave Hayama a thumbs-up.

“Hayato-kun, if can’t finish it, I can help you.”

“No, I didn’t prepare Tobe’s portion.”

Tobe’s kind words were frozen by Isshiki’s cold voice. Faced with this, Tobe started whining to Hayama.

“Irohasu is so mean!? Hayato-kun.”

“I am very happy that you are being considerate for me, but I think it would be better for you to just eat your own share, Tobe.”

Hayama told Tobe quietly, as though he was whispering to him. Thereupon, Tobe gave a thumbs-up again and laughed.

Oh I see now. Seems like the checkered cookies were made by Ebina-san. That was unexpected, and as I thought that, I took a look at Ebina-san.

“Un, HayaTobe? Doesn’t seem to be a match.”

Ebina-san seem unsatisfied, and shook her head repeatedly as she munched on her checkered cookies. Seems like there was no future in that route.

Now then, ignoring Miura’s side, I wondered about how the others were doing. I looked to the area opposite Miura’s area, which was where Kaihinsougou High was. They seem to be almost done as well.

Meguri-senpai and some others were together with the current Kaihinsougou High student council members and its alumni, chatting away happily as they made the pastries. Amongst them, there was one

person who noticed my existence and waved her hand at me. It was Orimoto Kaori. Ah ah, what are you doing waving your hand at this time? You haven't changed since junior-high. Well, I guess it didn't matter since I wouldn't overthink about that action of her now.

Orimoto seemed to be making something on the kitchen table and then came running towards me.

"Hikigaya, here."

After saying that, she passed me a paper plate of chocolate brownies. Seems like this was what she wanted to give me just now. Ah, no wrapping of any sort. No, that's wrong, to be able to receive something from her was already kind of a big deal so I should be thankful for that.

"Then....."

I recited thanks for the food and began to tuck in. Then, I saw someone appear behind Orimoto.

"Un. Isn't this sort of exchange great? To build up SEAMLESS relationships outside of the school framework is important. This is probably something necessary for the future."

Hearing that way of speaking, I immediately knew who it was. He was the student council president of Kaihinsougou High School, Tamanawa-san.

Having noticed Tamanawa, Orimoto walked towards him with the plate as well.

"Ah, president, you are here too. Here, for you as well."

"Th, thank you..... This is something from me."

As he thanked Orimoto for the gift, he took out something gently as well. It was a beautifully cut chiffon cake. It seems like it was something that they had made.

Orimoto looked at the chiffon cake blankly.

“Eh? Why?”

Hearing that question, Tamanawa proceeded to cough for a bit, and then started to start his lecture with his (god-damn jazz hands) gestures.

“During Valentines, it is the norm overseas for guys to be the ones giving gifts. This time, I want to have a feel of this GLOBALISATION. In Japan, this is probably what you would call being INFLUENCED.”

“Oh?”

However, Orimoto’s reply seemed lackluster this time round, and didn’t say anything like “PREACH IT!” Probably noticing the weak response, Tamanawa quickly added in some more words and his gestured picked up speed.

“This is probably due to the CULTURAL GAP that exists between Japan and other countries. If I had to give an example, it would be like how people in France only wear a skirt in front of important people.”

Oh.....In other words, this was the reason why Totsuka didn’t wear a skirt! I need to try harder! PREACH IT!

Just as I was renewing my resolve, Orimoto suddenly took a bite of the piece of chiffon cake.

“This is delicious. Thanks.”

“Ah, un. That..... It’s about time for COFFEE BREAK, how about we head back now?”

“What the heck is a coffee break? You are so funny.”

Orimoto laughed and said to me, “See you” as she waved her hands and walked back towards the Kaihinsougou High students. Then, Tamanawa who was left, stared daggers at me.

“Well then, let’s do this FAIRLY next time.”

Leaving me those baffling words, Tamanawa sauntered off.

“Nope, I am not going for her.....”

Come to think of it, did my murmuring reach his ears? Nah, probably not. If my words weren’t in KATAKANA, he probably wouldn’t hear it.

Then again, considering his attitude just now, could it be, that that was Takanawa’s effort in trying to hit on her! It looked like he was totally unable to convey his intention to her. Who cares, it’s none of my business.

Putting his matter at the back of my mind, I needed to work hard too. The important part is to get Totsuka to wear a skirt in front of me.

Eh, Totsuka, totsuka, suka, totsuka. I began searching for Totsuka in high spirits, and I easily found him. As expected of Totsuka, no matter where he was in this world, I had a hunch that I would be able to find him anyway!

I approached him and saw that he was together with Zaimokuza, and they were with Keika. Upon taking a closer look, Kawasaki was beside the kitchen table, clearing up the area as quickly as she could. I guess that the both of them had taken of the task of looking after Keika whilst she was cleaning up the area.

However, it seems that the two of them were not used to interacting with kids. Both had a look that suggested they were fighting a hard battle. Zaimokuza seems to have buried his face in the ground. At least there was still Totsuka soloing on. He was going 'Eh' and seemed to not know how to start a conversation with Keika.

"First time meeting you, Keika-chan. I am Totsuka Saika. I am in your care."

"Oh. Saika..... Saika..... Sa-chan? Sa,sa-chan?"

Probably because Keika heard a name similar to her sister, she became flustered as she didn't know how to address him.

Un un. I understand your pain. I was also flustered by Totsuka's super cuteness.

Well, I am quite confident in my abilities to handle young girls. Time for me to step in and help Totsuka.

"Ah, Hachiman."

"Ha-chan!"

Totsuka heaved a sigh of relief upon seeing me, whereas Keika looked up at me innocently. As I patted Keika's head, I gently made her look at Totsuka.

"Sai-chan. Call him Sai-chan."

"Un,Sai-chan."

Keika's flustered attitude from before seemed to have been resolved as she now knows how to differentiate between the two. Totsuka seems to be happy upon having his name called out by Keika, and laughed with an "Aha!"

Now then, there was still one more person, that person that was hiding behind Totsuka.

“This is Zaimokuza Yoshiteru. You can call him Zai-chan.”

“Zaimokuza.”

“No, no honourifics!? You are only doing that to me!? Is that some kind of reward in the industry!?”

Although Zaimokuza liked to exaggerate himself normally, but this seems to be genuinely surprised at having his named called in such a manner by a young girl. He was totally shocked and was stunned to the spot. No, was that actually joy? Well, who cares, it’s just Zaimokuza.

However, the ever kind hearted Totsuka did not forget to follow up on this.

“Don’t, don’t get too excited. Kids are prone to remembering weird words.”

“U, Uumu..... But my name is not weird.....”

Zaimokuza shook his head as though unable to accept what he had just said.

As those two were bickering with each other, Kawasaki rubbed her hands against her apron and rushed back with quick steps. Thereupon, Keika called out Sa-chan and flew towards Kawasaki.

“Sorry, thank you for looking after her.”

“Eh, it’s nothing. Hachiman came to help as well. Are you done tidying up, Kawasaki?”

“Yes, all thanks to you all.”

As she thanked Totsuka, she stared at me. Her mouth opened and closed, as though having trouble with something she wanted to say.

“That, it’s about time to go back……. Need to prepare dinner.”

“Ah, I see.”

Listening to her, I looked at the clock. Sure enough, it was indeed close to dinner time. No wonder she was in such a rush to clean up the room.

Although it would have been fine to leave it as it is, Kawasaki was surprisingly thoughtful. Kawasaki-san, has all the makings of a housewife.

“Alright then, Ke-chan, let’s go back home.”

Okay……. Sa-chan.”

Kawasaki patted Keika’s shoulders gently. Then, Keika tugged at Kawasaki’s skirt and responded to her actions with a sweet voice. As her elder sister, Kawasaki seemed to understand what Keika was trying to tell her.

“……I understand. Wait a moment.”

Saying that, she took out a bag that was stuffed with chocolates, and passed it to Keika. Keika took it from her, looking very satisfied, and presented it to me.

“Here, Ha-chan.”

“I think she wants to give it all to you……. Do accept it.”

"Oh, oh thank you. Seems like it's quite well-made. You did great Ke-chan."

I kept rubbing her head repeatedly and she hugged my waist tightly. Hahaha, what a cute girl, makes me want to rub her head even more.

".....There's, there's probably some chocolates made by me mixed into that bag as well."

As Kawasaki wore her coat, she said so with her face looking away. Hearing her, I looked at the truffle chocolate.

"Is that so?..... I can't really tell. Your sister is really amazing."

"I know right! But, Sa-chan was working very hard just now too."

With a cough, Keika puffed out her chest, and praised her sister with an arrogant attitude. Seeing that, Kawasaki gave a surprised expression before lapsing into laughter.

"You have already given him the chocolates, Ke-chan. Let's go."

Hearing that, Keika still did not let go of me. Witnessing this, Kawasaki continued to look at Keika intently. Thereupon, I could feel Keika trembling. Oi, surely there's no need to look at her with such a scary face.....

"Alright, let's go, Ke-chan."

As I said that, I began to walk, with Keika still clinging on tightly to me.

"Un, let's go!"

Keika continued to follow me. Kawasaki gave a 'Haa' sigh as she followed us from behind.

“Byebye, Ke-chan. See you again.”

“Umu. SALAD BAR.”⁴⁷

As Totsuka and Zaimokuza watched us leave, Keika waved her hands said “Byebye” to them. And like that, we left the cooking room and went down the stairs. In that time, Kawasaki helped Keika to wear a coat and wrapped a muffler around her. She was completely devoted to taking care of her little sister.

As she was doing those, we reached the entrance of the Community Center. The sky outside was already dark.

“Do you want me to walk you to the station?”

“There’s no need. I always go back at this sort of time anyway. Don’t you have other things to do anyway?”

Kawasaki slung her bag and her grocery bag, and said something like ‘Heave-ho’, before bending down to pick up Keika. During this time, something underneath Kawasaki’s skirt flashed before my eyes. I tried to avert my eyes with all my power. Seems to be something with a black lace, but I definitely did not see anything else.

“Well then, good bye.”

“Ha-chan, byebye!”

Kawasaki lowered her head slightly in farewell, and Keika, who was now at Kawasaki’s chest bade me farewell as well.

“.....Careful on the road.”

⁴⁷ A misheard from Fist of the North Star. Supposed to be sa-ra-ba-da (farewell), but in the anime was misheard/described as changed to sa-ra-da-ba (salad bar).

I called out to the two of them who were walking on the path that would lead to home, and watched their retreating figures getting smaller and smaller in the distance.

There was no wind and no clouds, and the winter night sky was clear.. However, it incited coldness as well. The two of them clung to each other tightly, so they probably wouldn't feel any coldness.

I kind of regretted not wearing any coats before coming out.

Although all I had to do was to go back inside, but what was unexpected was that I did not move even one step.

As I shivered, I sat down on the steps in front of the door and sighed deeply.

I had clearly not done anything worth of note, but nevertheless, I still felt a huge sense of fatigue.

Yet, I felt that what I had done was sufficient as well.

Hearing Miura, Ebina-san as well as the Kawasaki sisters' request, then organizing this event with Isshiki and the student council. There was also Orimoto, and Tamanawa as well as the student council members of Kaihinsougou High, and Meguri-senpai and Haruno-san too came running over to join, and even Hayama and Tobe came to participate as taste-testers. There was also Totsuka and Zaimokuza, and Hiratsuka sensei who dropped by as well.

It was more than enough.

I am really happy.

And that was what I murmured.

Just like the feelings of itchiness that an ant crawling on your body gives, that same feeling extended all the way to my neck, the corners of my mouth continued to remain in a smile. This was probably the cold's fault that caused my face to stiffen in such a manner.

I rubbed my face to try and disperse the cold, and stood up at last.

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Returning to the cooking room, I noticed that there were no longer any sounds of anyone cooking. Everyone was eating their own confectionaries and drinking tea, chit-chatting away happily.

This confectionary-making event that was before Valentine's Day has ended. What was left, was to pass the remaining time away and formally bring this event to a close.

I walked towards my seat where I had placed my bag. Yukinoshita was there as well. She prepared the tea pot and red tea gracefully.

The kitchen table was equipped with a gas burner that was currently heating up the kettle, and now, the water seemed to have boiled. Yukinoshita poured some water out from the kettle and she prepared to make tea.

What was beside it, was not those usually seen tea cups or mugs, but paper cups instead. There was no need to trouble her to bring those here anyway.

Yukinoshita poured the red tea into the paper cup, and after preparing three portions, sat back down again. Then, she noticed me walking towards her, and called out to me.

"Ara, seems like you worked hard."

"I didn't do anything worthy of that."

As I answered her I sat down, and Yukinoshita swiftly brought paper cup in front of me. Her eyes had a teasing edge to them.

“Is that so? Contrary to what you say, you seem to be pretty busy.”

“Busy?”

Was that because of chocolates? That’s right, chocolates and maka was really effective in reducing one’s fatigue. Come to think of it, the fact that I was moving quickly from place to place wasn’t exactly wrong, so it was indeed hard for me to deny what she had said. ⁴⁸

“Seems like you can get some rest at last.”

Saying that, she took a sip of red tea. Following her, I blew on the red tea and took a sip to taste it as well.

The feeling was different from when I used a normal tea-cup and I couldn’t get used to it, furthermore, because the heat would be directly transmitted to your hand, the speed at which I drank tea would also be slowed. Even so, it was still enough to warm up my body that had grown cold from the frost outside. After drinking a few mouthfuls, I let out a contented sigh.

“You worked hard as well.”

“Yes. That’s correct. I really worked hard.”

With that, Yukinoshita’s eyes looked in the direction of the oven.

Yuigahama was there.

⁴⁸ Chocomaka means something in a continuous motion. But if you split it up, you get choco (chocolate) and maka = maca in Spanish, which apparently has aphrodisiac effects.(and supposedly gives you a temporal energy boost)

Both her hands were wearing mittens, and carrying the baking tray, came running towards us.

Ah ah, I get it now. Yukinoshita was not only teaching Miura and Kawasaki how to bake. She probably taught Yuigahama as well. That indeed would be tiring.

“Hikki, try this!”

With a Ta-dah!, she presented a plate of chocolate cookies to me. Yuigahama must have been waiting in front of the oven for such an opportunity, for the cookies emitted a fragrance that indicated that it was fresh out of the oven.

Looking at it, it seemed to be just like any ordinary cookie. Although some of the shapes were uneven, but there weren't any obvious burnt marks. There also didn't seem to be any suspicious thing mixed into it. There didn't seem to be any problem with it.

Right then, what was left was just the taste.

I took a peek at Yuigahama's expression, who was standing right in front of me. What I saw were her pupils sparkling with anticipation, her restless shoulders shaking nervously, as well as a smile on her lips that tried to cover up her lack of confidence.

With that kind of expression she was making, I had no choice but to eat it.....

I gulped, making an audible noise. Naturally, what I swallowed wasn't saliva. If I must say it, then what I swallowed was my resolution!

“.....Alright, let's eat.”

With a long and deep breath, and then rolled up my sleeves all of a sudden! Just as I was about to quickly extend my hand towards it, Yukinoshita who was beside me opened her mouth without warning.

“You seem to be making some sort of tragic resolution, but it’s going to be alright. I more or less helped her with it.”

“.....What, well then, I am relieved.”

“I think I just heard something horrible!?”

Easing the tension from my shoulders, I tossed the cookie into my mouth carefreely. With a few munches and crunches, I swallowed it. After waiting for a bit, I realized that my body did not produce any adverse reaction to it.

“.....Amazing. It’s actually edible.”

“What do you mean by its edible..... Cookies are naturally edible, in fact, it’s meant to be eaten.”

As my honest thoughts unconsciously spilled out, Yuigahama puffed out her face upon hearing it. No no, knowing your cooking skills, this was already considered great praise from me?

But my surprise was real. Yuigahama really did put a lot of effort into it. Although all of this was really thanks to Yukinoshita.....

As I thought so I looked at Yukinoshita, she was brushing her hair off her shoulders, and puffed her chest out in pride.

“This is to be expected. After all, I did monitor her carefully for each important step of making the cookie.”

“That’s called monitoring!? I thought, that that was just you teaching me normally.”

Although Yuigahama seemed dejected, but in Yukinoshita's vocabulary, monitoring and teaching essentially had the same meaning, so she didn't really have to take it to heart.

In fact, Yukinoshita really didn't seem to care about the difference between the meanings of those two words, and was busy moving the cookies from the baking tray to a paper plate, and inspecting it carefully.

Then, she pinched her jaw, and nodded her head.

"Doesn't seem to have much problem. There seems to be nothing wrong with the taste as well, so I shall eat a little as well."

"So what you mean is that, I was there to test for poison..... Why am I the one who does such a dangerous task?"

"Don't keep making that talk about it being poisoned! I want to eat it as well."

The three of us sat back down, and reached out for the cookies.

It felt crispy and had a buttery fragrance to it. The aftertaste left behind by the soft sweetness and the bitter chocolate made it irresistible.

".....Delicious."

After eating one, Yuigahama made that remark casually, to which Yukinoshita nodded her head repeatedly at that. The two of them looked at each other, and Yuigahama immediately gave a shy laughter joyously, to which Yukinoshita returned it with a smile of her own.

Thereupon, Yuigahama turned her body to face me.

"It's tasty, right? Right?"

“Didn’t I say that it tasted normal?”

I already said that just now. Didn’t I? Being forced to answer by Yuigahama’s vigor, the expression of the two of them quickly grew dark.

“Ordinary.....”

“Normal?”

Yuigahama drooped her shoulders a little, and Yukinoshita glared at me lightly. Eh eh, wait a minute, what should I say in this sort of situation..... I racked my brains for the sayings of Hikigaya Hachiman Onii-chan, and mobilized my entire vocabulary that I had ever used on Komachi.

“Ah, eh. Well, that, that is the cookies are super delicious..... Thank you for them.”

Timidly, gingerly, I searched about for the words to say, and Yuigahama face instantly lit up, and Yukinoshita’s gaze became gentle as well.

“Un!”

Yuigahama replied energetically, whereas Yukinoshita remained silent as she refilled my cup of red tea.

That’s great, Komachi, your Onii-chan seems to have found the correct answer.....

Just like that, although I had to bring in Komachi to this, but truthfully speaking, these cookies really were tasty. Saying thanks was also because I truly felt grateful.

The sweet cookies, the warm red tea, having all these, were more than enough to make me satisfied. It should be so. That's why, once again, in my throat, I murmured that I was really happy.

And yet, that feeling of unease still existed within me.

Just as I felt that, I heard the sound of high heels stepping on the floor.

That person didn't seem to be interested in hiding the fact that she was approaching us, in fact she seemed to be bragging out her existence. Step by step, she approached us, and revealed herself.

Noticing the high-heel sounds, Yukinoshita stole a glance behind me. Her brow furrowed nearly instantly.

Just by these alone, it was sufficient to deduce who it was behind me. It was Yukinoshita Haruno.

"Nee-san. What's the matter."

Haruno-san did not answer Yukinoshita's question. Rather, she looked at me straight in the eyes, silently. Her fingers glided across her mouth, those seductive lips slowly opened.

"This is Hikigaya-kun's genuine things?"

The instant she said that, a chill ran over my spine, and I averted my gaze from Haruno-san's face instinctively. However, Haruno-san would not allow me to escape, and she took another step yet again to close the distance between her and me.

"This moment in time, is what you meant by the genuine article?"

".....I don't know."

I had no idea of how to come up with a meaningful answer.

Haruno-san's question had in it a sense of coldness, but also at the same time, it was also genuine.

As though it was telling me that she really didn't understand, that she couldn't comprehend this at all. That voice, sounded like she was forsaking me.

"Nee-san, what are you trying to do?"

"That, that's right, this, th, that....."

I raised my hand gently, stopping Yukinoshita and Yuigahama who was about to speak, having been unable to tolerate this anymore. Right now, the person who was being asked was me.

From the start, I didn't need to do anything. Yukinoshita Haruno didn't seem to be interested in anything else apart from my answer. She looked at me intently, noticing my each and every action, noticing each of my breaths.

"Is that it? I thought that you weren't this sort of person."

Saying this, she approached my back, and lowered her head and looked at me eye-to-eye.

"Are you really that boring?"

The distance between us was so close that I could feel her breath, that this distance was so close that I could touch her just by moving a little. Yet, that sentence felt as though it came from somewhere shockingly far.

"If I was that interesting, I would have already become the class popularity king."

"That is something that I like about you."

Seeing how I answered her whilst looking away, Haruno-san laughed as though she had found something funny. Then, she finally took a step away from me.

If she were to leave like that I would be more than happy. However, Yukinoshita Haruno would not do that. I had known long ago she wasn't such a generous person.

Haruno-san was a step away from us, and glaring at all of us.

".....However, you are all so boring currently. I... kind of prefer the Yukino-chan of the past."

That sentence caused me to catch my breath. I felt that my face was stiffening.

Although I had no way of looking at the expressions of Yukinoshita and Yuigahama who were looking down, I dare say that their expression and mine were the same. I willfully decided that for myself.

Haruno-san seemed to have realized that no one could answer her and took a short breath. Soon, the sound of the high-heels gradually grew further.

Hearing that voice, I understood very clearly what she was trying to convey.

The words hidden behind Yukinoshita Haruno's words, that this was not genuine.

I agree.

Met with this type of situation, these sort of relationships, there was that feeling of discomfort that I had.

Due to lack of experience, because I wasn't used to it, hence, I had always thought that these were merely feelings of discomfort. I had always thought that with the passage of time, I would get used to it, that I would be able to accept it.

Even so, she did not overlook this.

Something that had frozen and had clung on to my chest. The restless cold that was within me. The feeling of disgust that had always been there but had not revealed itself even until today.

Things that I didn't want to think about, had all been pointed out by Haruno-san.

"That is not trust, but something more unforgivable, more awful."

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What was left behind after a festival was loneliness.

It was not an exception for the event held in this cooking room. After Isshiki completed her simple concluding statement, everyone began to pack-up and left in groups of two and threes.

The number of people gradually grew fewer, the originally lively cooking room grew quiet as well. Only the student council members were left as well as us, the members of the Service Club.

As I was helping the student council members to clear up the trash and return everything to their original positions, Isshiki returned after having collected the posters.

"The student council will take care of the rest, so you guys can leave now?"

Listening to her, I took a look around the room once more. There was indeed not much left to be done. There shouldn't be any big problems leaving the rest of the work to them.

However, my answer was the opposite.

"Un..... But, I still want to help till the very end."

"Yes. There's no need to be too considerate towards us."

Be it Yuigahama, Yukinoshita or me. We all chose to stay back and help out.

Hearing our answer, Isshiki was surprised and looked at me seeking confirmation. As I nodded my head in reply, she smiled.

"Is that so? Then, I will take you up on your word."

Although Isshiki said that, but the one should be taking her up on her word was me. Because once this was all over, there would be no way for me to stop thinking about those things that I do not want to think about, hence I wanted to delay time as much as possible.

However, this kind of resistance could not continue to prolong this period of time.

The tidying up was almost complete, the only job left was to clean up our kitchen table.

I squashed the already cold paper tea cup, and tossed it into the trash bag. After sealing the opening firmly, there was nothing else to do.

After locking the door, and checking for anything that we had forgotten to take, everyone left the community center. Placing the trash bag at the designated area, there was no longer any reason for me to stay here.

“Okay, senpai, thank you for your hard work.”

Near the entrance of the community center, Isshiki gave a quick bow. The rest of the student council members also nodded their heads in agreement. This event was way too sudden, and everyone had a look of exhaustion on their faces.

No one else had the strength to utter, “Lets go celebrate!” or things along those lines, and each began to left for their homes.

The three of us were the same.

Yukinoshita checked her bag and some big luggage. There was probably red tea or some sort of cooking utensils for her own use in there.

“.....Let’s go.”

“Ah.”

Following Yukinoshita, I pushed along my bicycle and prepared to head towards the train station. However, Yuigahama grabbed hold of the back of my bicycle.

“What?”

Hearing me ask that, Yuigahama gave a somewhat troubled smile.

“I, I was thinking, let’s go have dinner?”

Her abrupt request caused me and Yukinoshita to look at each other.

“What should we do? It’s already quite late.”

“Then then, since I am going to stay overnight at Yukinon’s house, how about we eat something nearby?”

“Tonight..... You just decided that on your own didn’t you.....”

Indeed, Yuigahama seemed to stay over at Yukinoshita’s house quite often. I had the impression that they always go back together after this sort of event.

“Is, is that all right with you? I can’t?”

Yuigahama said so in a coquettish tone. Yukinoshita sighed softly.

“I don’t really mind.....”

“Woohoo! Then, let’s go! Hikki.....What about you?”

Her sweet voice was slightly different from the way she spoke to Yukinoshita just now, and caused me to feel a sort of pressure.

Hence, unable to think of a suitable reason to reject her, I had no choice but to agree.

“I will go as well, since I am hungry anyway. How about we gather by the station?”

“Un!”

Hearing her reply, I nodded my head in return as well.

I changed the direction of my bike, and began to pedal immediately.

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When I reached the train station, the two of them had also just came out from the gantry.

They were taking the train and I was riding my bike. Of course, the speed of the train was faster but sometimes, due to the waiting time, then there wasn't that much of a difference between riding a bike and taking the train. This time, we had arrived at the same time coincidentally.

After meeting up, in order to let Yukinoshita put her luggage, we first headed towards her home.

Yukinoshita's house was not very far from the train station, and the three of us engaged in casual conversation, and occasionally walked in silence.

Walking past the side road of the big park, a towering condominium that I was used to seeing soon came into view.

Walking past the pedestrian crossing, we were about to reach the entrance of the condominium, but suddenly, Yukinoshita stopped.

"What's the matter?"

"Ah, nothing....."

After being asked, Yukinoshita's reaction was slow to answer. She seemed to be staring intently at something with a quizzical look. Following her eyes, I saw a car. I had some form on impression towards that black luxury car.

That looks like..... Just as I thought till there, the car door opened, and a female alighted.

Her lustrous black hair was tied up together, she was dressed in a kimono and her style of walking exuded a sense of grandeur as well as dignity. This person was Yukinoshita's mother.

"Mother..... What are you doing here?"

"I heard from Haruno about your future education path. I came here to talk to you regarding that. Yukino. What are you doing outside so late at night....."

Facing her mother's caring gaze, Yukinoshita lowered her head. Seeing her reaction, Yukinoshita's mother sighed lightly.

"I thought that you weren't the type of kid who would do something like this."

Hearing this sentence, Yukinoshita raised her head in an instant, and looked at her mother's eyes fixedly.

However, she was unable to object to her, and was only able to bite her lips softly and looked away. The kind yet cold words wrapped about Yukinoshita. To keep her in check, to deny her, this sentence was more than enough.

Yukinoshita's mother was not looking at her sharply. Her voice too did not contain any trace of anger or irritation. Perhaps it would be more correct to say that it was closer to that of grief or sorrow.

"I believed in you, hence I gave you freedom, but..... No, this is my responsibility, this is my failure."

Not giving anyone the opening for a rebuttal, Yukinoshita said as such and shook her head silently when she was done.

"That is....."

Yukinoshita spoke in a weak voice as though trying to say something, but this too, was swept away by yet another sentence from her mother.

"Perhaps it's my bad....."

Her own monologue was apologetic and she seemed to be lamenting something as well. Her monologue that came out in bits and pieces that showed her frail and self-punishing attitude did not permit anyone else to take the blame.

No one else, not even Yukinoshita, who was the subject of her talk.

As soon as she noticed Yukinoshita's mother sighing away in regret, Yuigahama spoke timidly.

"That..... Today is, because it was an event by the student council, that's why, she was helping out until so late....."

"Is that so, are you here to walk her home, then, thank you. However, it's already quite late now, your family members must be worried about you. What do you think?"

Hence, please hurry up and go back. Although she didn't say this directly, but she conveyed the same meaning with that kind voice and gentle smile, without any trace of sharpness in her words no matter how hard you searched.

At the same time, her attitude also drew a clear line for all of us, that this was their family's problem, so outsiders shouldn't interfere in it. We had no choice but to back off as well. We both knew that we weren't in a position to say anything.

After we kept our silence, Yukinoshita's mother quietly closed the distance between us, and gently touched Yukinoshita's shoulders.

"I hope that you are able to become yourself, to live a life of your own..... However, I am afraid that you would walk the wrong path..... From here on, what do you want to do?"

This question seem to contain a lot of subtext. I was unable to completely understand it.

“.....I will explain it properly, so could you please go back for now?”

“Is that so..... If that’s what you say.....”

Hearing the words from Yukinoshita, whose head was lowered, Yukinoshita’s mother had a perplexed expression on her face. Then, her gaze shifted towards me and Yuigahama.

“..... It’s time for me to go back as well, since she’s already safely back home.”

Saying that, I gave a bow towards Yukinoshita’s mother, and turned about. Having a boy so close to her daughter who lives alone, that was probably something that didn’t rest well with her. If I were to continue staying there, that would probably be unfavorable for Yukinoshita.

After walking away for a few meters and looking back, Yukinoshita seemed to have exchanged a few sentences with her mother. After that, Yukinoshita’s mother returned to the car. Yukinoshita who remained rooted to the spot for a while quickly disappeared behind the condominium’s doors.

As Yuigahama and I waited for the traffic light in front of the pedestrian crossing, Yukinoshita’s family car slowly drove by in front of us. The windows of the back seats were covered with some reflective material, and I was unable to look inside. However, I felt that I was being observed, which made me lose my composure.

Soon, the light turned green, and Yuigahama ran a few steps ahead before turning round.

“Then, I will go back first.”

“Ah..... let me walk you home.”

However, Yuigahama shook her head.

“There’s no need, it’s very near to the station from here. Also, I feel that..... this isn’t very fair.”

“.....I see.”

I replied her helplessly, and just like that, I watched her leaving figure walking away from me.

Even if I were to make a detour to the train station, it wouldn’t really affect the distance that I have to travel to go home. Even so, I still did not chase after her.

Watching her figure growing smaller and smaller under the street lamps, I finally started to get on my bike.

The wind was not big, but the cold air of winter pierced my face painfully.

Ignoring everything else, I began to pedal my bike non-stop, and as opposed to my body which was starting to get heated up, my mind became completely chilled.

What I appear to be. What she appears to be. What our true self appears to be.

No matter who it was, we all have our personal image that had always been determined by others, one that was always slightly off the mark. Whether it’s me or her, we were all the same. Our true selves and our appearances always seem to differ from one another.

This was a fact that was easily understood without the need for anyone to confirm it.

Because, this was what I had said so in the past. This was what the Hikigaya Hachiman of the past had always been saying.

Was this really okay? Was this your desire? Was this Hikigaya Hachiman?

That jeer, that angry roar, that howl; I closed my eyes and shut my ears to prevent myself from hearing them. What replaced the words that should have come out of my mouth, was a hot sigh.

Our true self was something that not even ourselves could assert. Then, this genuine article. Where can we actually find our true selves? Why was it that in this world, our relationships were defined by this sort of thing?

Unease. Once I give this a more definite name, I would no longer be able to think of it as just mere unease.

This feeling, this relationship, was something that cannot be defined. It was something that must not be given a name. One shouldn't discover the meaning of such a thing. Because, once one appends a meaning to it, it would lose all of its other functionality.

If I could just admit it, it would surely be easier for me, but the reason why I did not do so, was because I knew. That if I mold it into something else, if I were to change it, it would only lead to its corruption.

Because what I wanted was something incorruptible, I had always avoided giving it a name.

Whether it was me, or her, were we all clinging onto these shapeless words? My brain was full of such thoughts.

At the very least, I wouldn't have to think about these extra stuff if the snow would just fall and cover up and hide away all these sort of thoughts.

However, snow was extremely rare in this city, and tonight, the night sky was not muddied and was perfectly clear.

The light from the stars were ever so bright, and illuminated me ever so distinctly.

Chapter 7

[In spite of herself, Yukinoshita Yukino's eyes were bright and clear.]

It has been a period of time since the cooking event near Valentine.

The past few days had clear weather, but today, the weather was cloudy. Seems like this sort of uncertain weather was going to persist for a few days. The temperature didn't drop too sharply in the night, but frankly, this was just within the error margin. Chiba's winters were cold as always.

After school, as the sun began to set, I felt the temperature drop further by a notch.

I went into the club room to get away from the cold that permeated the corridors of the special building. Thanks to the warmth in the room, I could enjoy reading my paperback in peace.

The twilight drew near, the club room was as it has always been.

The long table had a teacup, a mug and another teacup that looked out of place with the other two. Out of the corner of my eyes, I could see Yukinoshita pouring red tea into each of them. She placed the steaming hot tea in front of me and Yuigahama.

I lifted my head from the paperback so as to take the red tea, and Yukinoshita and I met each other's gaze.

Yukinoshita immediately lowered her head, but quickly looked up again. Then, she lowered her gaze once more. This unnatural attitude of hers was clearly different from usual. Yuigahama seemed to feel the same way as well.

“Yukinon?”

Hearing her voice, Yukinoshita looked at her with some restraint, then glanced at me again. Then, she spoke with some difficulty.

“I am really sorry for that time..... That, my mother, she.....”

Saying that, she lowered her head silently. Although she didn't say much, judging from the few keywords and the way she spoke, I quickly understood what she was apologizing for. The events of that day rose easily to my mind without me having to rack my brains. I could not forget it; the events of that day kept playing itself out again and again in my head. The matter with her mother notwithstanding, the words that Haruno-san had said to me as well as the parting words that she gave Yuigahama kept repeating themselves in my head.

It's just that there wasn't any point in talking about them, not to mention that no one was to blame for that chain of events.

Hence, I shook my head slightly and told her that it was nothing she should worry about. Thereupon, Yuigahama, who was seated diagonally opposite me, waved her hand vigorously to imply that she didn't mind either.

“It's nothing at all! I was often told off by my mom for coming home late as well.”

“Well, I suppose moms are all like that. They are always nagging at their children. Furthermore, she would clean my room and ask me questions like whether school had been fun out of the blue.”

Why were the mothers of this world so interested in their son's living space, their friends and even their reading interests? What in the world? Was she my fan? Thank you, mom. But please don't touch the drawers of my desk.

Hearing both mine and Yuigahama's words, her expression softened. A small smile could be seen and she brushed her hair away from her shoulders like always.

"..... So, Hikigaya's mom would have an especially huge problem."

"Hikki's mom, I wonder what she's like."

"Even if you asked me that..... She's very normal. She's like another Komachi. Recently, due to the entrance exam coming up, Komachi and her have been talking non-stop about it.

Even if the relationship between those two were normally good, there would still be conflicts every now and then. Anyway, the biggest reason behind their quarrels were regarding dad's attitude. Dad would be overly concerned with Komachi and nag non-stop at her, causing my mother to flare up. Then, Komachi would get angry as well, and the mood around the house would feel savage.

.....Ah, this was totally not a conflict between mom and daughter. It was just them shunning dad. Well, this is indeed a common occurrence whenever it comes to such exams or career paths.

Speaking of this, Yuigahama nodded her head and spoke.

"Ah, that's right. Komachi is taking her exam tomorrow. We are also going to be on a school holiday due to those exams."

"I think that if it's Komachi, she shouldn't have any problems."

"Ah....."

I could sense a little bit of uncertainty in her words. Nodding my head back at her, the voice in which I replied her probably sounded as uncertain as she did.

Tomorrow was the day she was taking the high-school entrance examinations.

While we are at it, tomorrow was also Valentine's Day. The important point was that I wouldn't be able to receive Komachi's chocolates this year. Well then, till the next year, my bitter disappointment! However, if we were talking about anticipation for the next year, I realized that I didn't even know what next year was going to be like. Thinking too far ahead will only make one gloomy.

Yuigahama probably noticed my expression, and smiled at me anxiously.

"Of course you would be worried, you are her brother after all."

"Exactly....."

Hearing such kind words, I couldn't help but nod my head heavily.

I exhaled deeply, and along with that exhaled breath, were stuff that I didn't want to think about as well as my resentment towards the future.

"Komachi is way too cute, she will surely be popular right? So if that's the case, I have to be wary of boys, because it is important that they don't find out that she has me for a brother. After all, this will affect her reputation."

"That's what you are worried about?! I mean, you are already assuming she passed?!"

"I don't know whether you are being positive or negative here."

Yuigahama seemed shocked whilst Yukinoshita just sighed, seemingly dumbfounded. They looked at each other and chuckled.

Seems like there wasn't going to be any visitors today. The club room had a relaxed atmosphere flowing about it like always. As I enjoyed this faint sense of relief, I continued to turn the page of my paperback. Yuigahama sprawled herself lazily on the table, fiddling about with her mobile phone whilst Yukinoshita was taking off the lid of the teapot, and poured another cup of red tea.

Then, she placed her bag on the table, and from it, took out a small paper bag. Opening the bag, some light rustling sounds could be heard as well as the presence of a sweet smelling fragrance. Looks like this was some sort of snacks to go along with the tea.

Yukinoshita poured them carefully onto a wooden plate. I took a glance at it, and realized there was an assortment of them, ranging from the chocolate chip with jam, or cookies with checked patterns as well as multi-colored ones. From the types of cookies as well as the paper bag, I could infer that they were probably not brought from a shop.

"Ah, are these all hand-made by you?"

I saw Yuigahama's eyes sparkling with anticipation.

Yukinoshita's skills in cooking was undisputed. Including the cooking event just a few days ago, she has already demonstrated her cooking prowess several times. Each time, Yuigahama would have a great feast.

Hence, there was nothing surprising there.

This should have been the case, but upon hearing Yuigahama's casual comment, she seemed to not know how to answer her.

".....Umm, yes. I made a bit last night."

Then, she lowered her head slightly, and played about with the edge of the plate with her fingers, and took a small breath. Then, she sneaked a glance in my direction.

With her gaze downwards, her head and arms were not moving. From the gap in her fringe, I could tell that she was hesitant to look at me directly and was now regarding me with some restraint. Her actions would cause anyone to be discomposed.

Yukinoshita's mouth opened slightly before closing tightly again, as though she was having trouble deciding whether or not she should say it. I noticed those cherubic lips of her more than ever and instantly averted my gaze.

Then, the entire club room lapsed into silence.

"I see..... I did try to put in some more effort since that time, but it's still not as good."

Yuigahama seemed to dislike the silence that was caused in the previous instant, and tried to smooth things over with a laugh.

She fiddled about with the bun of hair on her head as she shook her head.

"My house's oven range seems to have spoiled. It keeps making those weird noises and won't bake anything at all."

"That's probably because it is just a microwave oven."

Saying that, I sighed. I was probably relieved by her usual display of stupidity. Yukinoshita too, was covering her mouth with her hand, trying to hide her laughter. Then, she placed her school bag on her knee and took out yet another small paper bag.

She had probably decided to give this bag to Yuigahama. The bag was decorated with a cute pink ribbon and had cat paw prints on it.

“If you would be so kind as to accept this.”

“Is it really okay!? Oh, oh! Thanks!”

“The things inside are more or less the same.”

Yukinoshita added in a line of apology to Yuigahama, who had received the bag with great joy.

“Uun, I am really happy! Yukinon’s snacks are super tasty.”

Yuigahama hugged the paper bag tightly to her chest. Then she held it in her hand and looked at it gently. Blinking her eyes several times, she looked at Yukinoshita.

“Eh..... there’s only my portion?”

I understood the meaning behind that question and instinctively looked away. I tried to continue reading the paperback in my hand without shifting my head back, but found that it was impossible.

Why did I have to look away?

I noticed the ‘Ding’ sound that the bowl made, echoing throughout my ear. Even if I didn’t look at it with my eyes, I couldn’t block out the noises that were coming from inside me. What I could do was to try and bury them with my thoughts.

Willfully trying to understand, willful self-awareness, willful expectations. Whether or not she had prepared some for me, it was strange to try and derive some meaning out of it. This club had only three people. Even if I was given it, it would be just an obvious consideration on her part. When you try to give such stuff deeper

thought, to try and decipher some sort of meaning behind it, then you were already being overly self-conscious. Thinking about this sort of thing was disgusting. To frantically tell yourself that whilst not acting on it was repulsive as well. These sort of repulsive and disgusting things were definitely wrong.

Although I was determined to bury such thoughts in my head, my restless feelings would not calm down. I pretended to comb back my hair and my restless eyes looked about the surroundings.

Out of the corner of my eyes, I saw Yuigahama's mouth stiffening. Her white and thin throat moved all of a sudden.

"What about Hikki's?"

There was no need to help me ask. No, it's not like I really wanted it. I am being serious.

However, I did not say that out loud.

Yuigahama's voice and eyes, were looking out for others like always. She posed the question ever so timidly, but even so, I could see her left hand that was originally on her knee, grasping the hem of her skirt tightly. Seeing her like that, the words that I wanted to say stuck in my throat.

"Ah, no, I don't really....."

I clumsily stuttered those words out. The mood was growing heavy, and then came the sound of Yukinoshita's sigh.

Yukinoshita gripped the bag that was on her knees tightly, and then placed it under her arms before silently pushing her chair aside and standing up.

Leaning herself against the long table, she stretched out her hand and pushed the plate of cookies in front of me.

“If you would.”

“Oh, oh.....”

I tried to give a reply but her eyes did not meet mine, and was constantly looking towards the side. The side of her face was illuminated by the evening sun. Perhaps it was due to the cloudy weather, but the evening sun today seemed to be a deeper shade of red than usual, and the whole clubroom was dyed in red.

Her eyes and neck were dyed red, her lips trembling slightly in embarrassment and those long eyelashes kept flickering as she blinked. I hesitated to look at her directly and hence, I closed my paperback harshly instead, and reached out for the cookies.

“.....This is delicious.”

“I know right!”

Yuigahama leaned forward to reply me after she heard my non-committal murmur. Then, she took a cookie herself, bit down on it and placed her hands on her cheeks in joy.

“.....Is, is that so. I made it like how I had always done so.”

Watching our response, the tension seemed to ease from her shoulders as she answered and then, she finally returned to her seat.

The cookies were placed at the center of the table, the correct place where it should be. Steam rose from the teapot and teacups.

We talked about our thoughts regarding today's red tea and snacks, sometimes lapsing into silence, where some of us would be either

playing with our mobile phones or reading a book. Then, we would once again break into conversation and the sound of laughter would fill the club room from time to time.

Without anyone coming for a consultation, the club room had a calm atmosphere about it.

The time passed by slowly, and the sun was soon touching the faraway sea.

The evening sun was not hot in the winter. It emitted light but not warmth.

If we were to ignore it, this place would soon become cold.

Hence, we were forced to move about, in order to warm ourselves.

Even if we felt that tinge of discomfort in doing so.

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In the end, no one came to the club room, and club activities ceased as the time to head home arrived.

I closed the door, and waited for Yukinoshita to return the club room keys. After that, we left the building. For some reason or other, we continued on our conversation in the club room, and arrived at the bicycle parking lot.

I wouldn't call that returning the favor, but I did push along my bicycle and accompanied the two of them to the school gate.

I didn't use the side gate as I would usually do, but instead, headed towards the main gate which led to a big street leading to the station. Looking up, the sky had already gone dark.

The clouds were low hanging. It looked like it was about to rain.

“Uu--- So cold!”

“Better to wrap your muffler properly around yourself now.”

As soon as she took a step out of the school gate, Yuigahama shivered violently. Yukinoshita who was beside her, was gallantly helping to wrap the muffler around her.

Although this scene was sufficient to warm my heart, it did nothing to warm my body.

As soon as the sun set, the temperature dropped even more drastically. Once we stopped moving, the chills would come creeping up to your body, feet and mind.

“It is seriously cold out here.....”

When I thought about the road home, I became gloomy. When I thought about pushing my bike in the cold wind, I really felt like I couldn't take it anymore..... I too, re-tightened my muffler, wore my gloves deeper and raised my hand slightly.

“See you.”

“Un. See you tomorrow.”

Yuigahama waved her small hands in front of her chest. I returned her gesture with a nod and was about to straddle up to my bike.

At this time, ever so faintly, I heard a voice mixed with a sigh.

“.....Ah.”

Turning my head back, I guess that Yukinoshita had wanted to call out to me but stopped midway. She had taken half a step forward.

My eyes were asking her what's the matter, but her demeanor did not change. She seemed to have something to say but her lips did not move. She stood there, stock still, both her hands clutching tightly the opening of the bag, which hung from her left shoulder.

Seeing her trembling, uneasy gaze, I did not thoughtlessly ask her what the matter was but stood there motionlessly, waiting for her to speak.

This silent 'war' continued on for some time and then the sound of the gravel and sand could be heard.

"Ah, eh, I think I should just go on ahead?"

Although Yuigahama said all this with a troubled smile, she had only taken a step back. She played with the bun of hair with her gloved hand and looked at Yukinoshita, observing her reaction.

Yukinoshita seemed to be unwilling to see her making that face and shook her head slightly, then gazed intently at Yuigahama imploringly. Seeing that, Yuigahama lowered her head in that instant, but quickly looked up, looked at her gently and asked once more.

"Eh..... What should we do?"

The voice contained no trace of bewilderment, just a kind voice seeking confirmation.

".....That is."

The words that she was about to say vanished into the distance, just like the blowing wind. Unable to find the right words, she blushed and had a troubled expression on her face as she lowered her gaze and stared at her feet. Maybe it was due to her using too much force, but her

shoulders were twitching, and she was clutching her bag even tighter than before.

We waited for her to continue her sentence, not moving at all. No one was making a sound, but soon, a hard sound could be heard.

Ka-to.

I had a hunch that this was the sound of heels striking the asphalt.

The sound grew louder with each step, making me think that it was the sound of my heartbeat. Perhaps that this was some sort of illusion of a sound that reached only my ears. I even thought that it was the physical manifestation of the unease that had always been strongly rooted inside of me.

But this didn't seem like a sound that was heard only by me. Yuigahama looked in the direction of the approaching footsteps. Then she let out a cry of surprise.

"Ah....."

Soon, the footsteps stopped abruptly. We followed Yuigahama's gaze and what we saw opened our eyes wide.

"Yukino-chan, I am here to fetch you."

"Nee-san....."

Seeing her, Yukinoshita uttered those words involuntarily.

Yukinoshita Haruno's heeled boots sounded out once more as she walked to our front. She put her hands into her coat pockets, and had an intrepid smile on her face. She tilted her head to the side, as though looking at Yukinoshita.

“I didn’t know anything that could possibly warrant you coming down to fetch me.”

“It’s what our mom wanted, that you and I should live together temporarily. Ah, there’s a spare room in your apartment, right? It won’t be a problem if I arrange for the luggage to be delivered tomorrow right? If its morning I can still take care of it, but I will be going out in the afternoon, so can I leave that to you?”

Haruno-san unleashed a volley of questions so as to prevent me and Yuigahama from interrupting.

If she seized the initiative just like that, then it would be impossible for us outsiders, to say anything at all.

Above all else, although the tone of Haruno-san’s voice sounded like she felt she was being a bother, it felt way too natural. As though this was something that had been decided long ago. Her demeanor felt like she would not listen to any form of objections.

“Wa, wait. Why this all of a sudden.....”

Yukinoshita said it with a mix of disapproval and bewilderment. To that, Haruno-san’s shoulder shook as laughed loudly.

Then, she leaned forward a little, and looked at Yukinoshita as she replied.

“You should know, don’t you? Or at least, have an idea.”

Hearing her question, Yukinoshita’s shoulders jumped in surprise.

“.....This, is something that I will do myself. It has nothing to do with you, Nee-san.”

Yukinoshita was definitely glaring at Haruno-san now, as she replied in a sharp voice that clearly stated her rejection of that proposal.

The thing that Yukinoshita ought to do herself. I fear that that was referring to the matter that she and her mom had discussed a few days ago.

That time, they had probably made some sort of promise, that Yukinoshita would give the answer to her question herself.

But still, even so, Yukinoshita Haruno was right here before us.

Was it because her mother had no longer wanted to wait for her daughter's answer or was this just an act of simple concern for her returning home late at night? I wasn't sure. It was probably only Haruno-san that understood her mother's thoughts.

Haruno-san listened to Yukinoshita's words quietly.

The smile that had been present earlier was gone. She narrowed her eyes at Yukinoshita, her sharp gaze piercing her, as though trying to catch hold of her, not letting her escape. She continued to look at Yukinoshita with that cold stare; All of Yukinoshita's actions and expressions were reflected in her eyes. It even seemed like that gaze had seen through all of Yukinoshita's thoughts.

Soon, her mouth opened slightly.

"Does Yukino-chan even have a 'self'?"

"Wha....."

These words by Haruno-san threw Yukinoshita into disarray. Just as she was about to ask for the meaning of that question, Haruno-san cut her off preemptively by continuing to speak.

“You have always been following in my footsteps, can you really call that ‘your own thoughts’?”

Although there was now a thin smile on her face, Haruno-san’s voice was far colder than usual, and her frozen gaze pierced through Yukinoshita.

Yukinoshita did not make any noise in objection or produce any words of denial. She looked at Haruno-san, completely dumbfounded. Seeing her in this state, Haruno-san shrugged her shoulders lightly and sighed in amazement.

“Yukino-chan has always been allowed to do as she pleased, but she has yet to decide anything for herself.”

Her voice was gentle, yet there was pity in it as well.

Then, her gaze of pity shifted away from Yukinoshita. She directed her gaze now at Yuigahama, who was beside Yukinoshita, and then to me, who was standing opposite them.

When our eyes met, she chuckled unintentionally.

“.....You have no idea of what you should do even at this juncture, don’t you?”

This question, I had no idea who it was directed at.

Not only Yukinoshita, but even I was rooted to the spot. I had wanted to stop Haruno-san from continuing on with her verbal assault, but my voice seemed to be stuck in my throat, unable to come out. What could be the right thing to do now? To that, I had no idea.

“What does Yukino-chan want to do?”

“If you two are going to quarrel, could you do it somewhere else?”

I spoke at last, so as to prevent Haruno-san from questioning further.

That was because she was definitely going to say that one conclusive line. One that would thrust the truth in our faces. Hence, I could not allow her to continue. Not for Yukinoshita's sake, but for mine.

Haruno-san seemed like she had her fun taken away from her and looked at me with a bored expression. Her eyes were full of scorn, as though asking if these were the only words that I was capable of.

"A quarrel? I hardly think that this qualifies as one. We had never actually argued before."

"Even if that is true, this is not the place to say such things."

With that, we stared at each other coldly. I used every ounce of my willpower to continue staring at her, trying my best not to avert my eyes.

"Th, that..... we are giving it some proper thought. Yukinoshita too, and me as well."

Yuigahama intervened, trying to stick up for us. She stood up right next to Yukinoshita and spoke those words strongly. Yet, under Haruno-san's stare, her voice gradually grew weaker. At the very end, her entire head was facing the ground. Haruno-san looked at her gently with a pitiful gaze and told her.

"..... I see. Then, I would like to hear it when you come back. You have only one place that you can go back to anyway."

With the addition of this line, she turned around and left. The sound of her heels grew increasingly distant, and I could feel the tension in my body slipping away.

From the gaps within the thick clouds, the light from the sunset illuminated the figure of Haruno-san eerily. As I watched her leave, I finally heaved a deep sigh of relief. It felt as though I had not been breathing for a long period of time.

We were unable to look at each other's face. Yukinoshita lowered her head and bit her lips, standing there motionlessly. Yuigahama looked on with a hurt expression. Then, there was me, who looked up at the sky, all the while thinking of some appropriate words to bid farewell to them after all that I had said just now.

"Eh, eh..... I know. Come to my house?"

And so, faced with her proposal that she had suggested with a smile on her face in a bid to smooth things over, I could not find any reason to object to it.

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Walking along the huge street that led from the school to the station, we soon arrived at a place whereby big condominiums stood in rows.

Yuigahama resided in one of these condominiums.

Along the way, we encountered many people who were going home from school or work during this period of time. The hustle and bustle of the crowd spilled all around us. This clamor was most welcoming to us, who had been walking silently all this while.

When both Yukinoshita and I opened our mouth to speak, it was only to say "Sorry for the intrusion." When entering Yuigahama's house. However, after staying in her room for a while, we were finally able to talk to each other instead of just sighing.

"Sorry, my room is not very tidy."

Saying that Yuigahama sat down in front of a low table, and passed us a cushion each.

“.....Thank you.”

Yukinoshita offered a simple sentence of gratitude and sat down quietly beside Yuigahama, hugging the cushion. I imitated her as well, and sat down cross-legged on the floor. They were seated across me.

Thanks to the short fur on the pink-colored rug, my feet felt warmer.

Hugging the fluffy beaded cushion, I felt like rolling about the room.

The rack nearby was overflowing with some cute merchandise, as well as some other goods that seemed to have an enigmatic Asian feel to it and a clutter of fashion magazines piled up on top of one another. There was also a study table that did not look like it had ever been used, and was currently being used to store goods.

Although Yuigahama had said that her room wasn't tidy, but I thought that it was more than qualified to be called tidy. At least, it was tidier than mine.

But I found myself unable to relax. There was a fragrance in this room. Just that alone was enough to unsettle me. This fragrance seems to be coming from the bedside, hence my eyes darted unconsciously in that direction. At a glance, I noticed a small bottle by the bedside. There were several thin sticks in the bottle, and it appeared that that was the source of the fragrance.

What's that..... I thought as I looked at it when I heard someone clearing their throat. Turning my head back to the two of them, I saw Yuigahama twisting her body about shyly.

“Can, can you not keep staring there?”

“Eh, ah, no, what, because there’s something like fried pasta over there?”

I hurried replied in a high-pitched voice. Yuigahama laughed in amazement.

“That is a room fragrance.....”

Oh, so that was a perfume designed for use in a room..... I presume that those pasta-like sticks sucked up the perfume before dispersing it. Well, whatever, how would I know? Heh, so there was this kind of thing in a girl’s room. I was amazed, and saw, out of the corner of my eyes, someone trying to hide her laughter.

“Fried pasta.....”

Looking her way, I saw Yukinoshita laughing heartily as she buried her head in the cushion. No, surely it wasn’t that funny..... This person’s sense of humor sure was strange as always.

As I continue to think about this, and smiled unconsciously. Yuigahama sighed with relief as well.

When she felt that we could finally settle down and have a good talk, Yukinoshita lifted her head up from the cushion and corrected her seating posture.

Then, she lowered her head silently.

“Sorry..... For the trouble I caused.....”

“It’s nothing! Don’t worry about it.”

Yuigahama waved her hands in front of her chest, and spoke in a cheery voice. At the same, a voice that was even more cheerful than her overlapped with hers

“Exactly~. There’s nothing at all to worry about.”

A female appeared, one who didn’t knock on the door but simply pushed it open. She was carrying a tea set complete with tea. She was wearing a thick coat along with a long skirt, giving off the impression of calmness. She had a somewhat childish face, which gave off the impression of youth. Each time she laughed merrily, the bun of hair at the back would shake with vigor as well.

“Mama! Don’t just enter without warning me.”

Although Yuigahama seemed angry when she said that, but this Mama merely ignored her with a “Eh?” and a smile. It didn’t take a genius to figure out that she was Yuigahama’s mother. A friendly smile as well as a good figure. Like mother, like daughter.

.....Wait, no. I would still have believed it if someone were to tell me that she was Yuigahama’s sister. But since she called her mama that means it must be her mother? Yuigahama’s mother, abbreviated as Yuigahamama. That totally doesn’t seem like an abbreviation, not to mention that it was hard to pronounce as well.

Yuigahama’s mother squatted down beside the low table and began to pour tea. Then, she passed the tea to me, at the same time saying “Here~”.

“Ah, thank you. Sorry for the trouble.....”

At this time, was it better to say “Please don’t fuss over me” or “Don’t worry about me” or “Don’t bother about me” for this tea-ceremony? I didn’t have much experience being a guest at another’s house, so I felt really helpless now. Furthermore, the other party was Yuigahama’s mother, which made me even more nervous, and resulted in me stammering my reply.

Also, I felt shy looking at her, hence I kept looking down, when I heard her cry out “Wa” in joy.

I looked up warily, and noticed that Yuigahama’s mother was looking straight at me.

She observed me for a brief period, during which she constantly said words like “Heh” and “Ho.”

Seeing that I had trouble replying her, Yuigahama's mother laughed happily.

“You must be Hikki-kun..... right? I always hear Yui talking about you.”

“Oh, oh.....”

I want to die. I am so embarrassed that I want to die.

“Mama, don’t say things that you don’t need to!”

Yuigahama rushed towards her mom in a fluster. Then she stood up and took the plate with the sweets from her mom as she tried to shoo her mom away from the room.

“Eh..... Mama wants to chat with Hikki as well.”

“Give it a rest already.”

Yuigahama pushed her mom’s back, who was kicking up a fuss, and managed to shoo her all the way to the doorway.

Yukinoshita smiled at the exchange between the two of them, and then, her gaze met with Yuigahama’s mother who was about to be pushed out of the door.

“Ah, that’s right, Yukino-chan.”

“..... Y, yes.”

Yuigahama’s mother was smiling broadly as she responded to Yukinoshita’s bewildered reply.

“You are going to stay over here tonight right? I will go take the mattress.....”

“I can do that!”

Yuigahama used all her might to push her mother out of the door and locked the door. Some sounds could still be heard from outside but Yuigahama ignored it and let out a long sigh.

“Ahaha..... Really sorry for that. When Mama knew that Yukinon was going to come, she was so happy. She’s usually not that excited. This is so embarrassing.....”

To the embarrassed Yuigahama, Yukinoshita shook her head lightly and told her she needn’t worry. Then, she gave a helpless smile.

“Your relationship with your mother is really good. I am a little envious of it.”

There was a tinge of regret and loneliness in her expression. With a mother and a sister like that, it would be difficult for anyone, not just Yukinoshita, to get along with them. Yuigahama and I thought of this and we were unable to say anything.

Noticing our silence, Yukinoshita hurriedly added on to her previous sentence.

“Sorry, I must have said something weird..... I should be going back now.”

Yukinoshita prepared to stand up, but was forced back down by Yuigahama. As she returned to her original seat, she spoke cheerfully as she clapped her hands.

“Why not stay the night here? I often have sleepovers with other people. There are times whereby it’s not too convenient to go back home, right?”

“Eh, but.....”

Caught off guard by her words, Yukinoshita seemed puzzled, and hesitated for a bit. Her gaze shifted about restlessly from her troubles, and in the end, looked towards my direction. No, don’t look at me, it’s not like I can help you or anything.....

However, taking into account the exchange with Haruno-san just now, in this current situation, if Yukinoshita were to go home, it would only lead to the same result as just now.

From Yuigahama’s tone I could tell, that she was thinking about this as well. As I thought this, I looked at Yuigahama, and she nodded her head in response in a way that only I could see.

Well, if it was difficult to face someone, then don’t. Backing off was also one of the effective ways in which one could smooth things over. But if a deadline was not set in which the people involved would face each other for a final conclusion, then it would just be running away from the problem. However, I could hardly say that this was a bad idea in delaying the time.

“.....Well, I would say that the both of you have yet to calm down. So why not take tonight to think things over. But you would still have to make a call.”

“Un, this sounds like a good idea.”

Yuigahama agreed with me, after which Yukinoshita hugged her knees, and thought for a short while before nodding her head slightly to show her agreement.

“.....What you say makes sense.”

She retrieved her mobile phone from her bag and placed her call. She was probably calling Haruno-san. After a little bit of waiting, the call got through. Yukinoshita raised her head and began to speak.

“.....Hello. I think that both of us have yet to calm down, so I'll take tonight to think things over. I am just informing you, that's all.”

Yukinoshita completed her message and the other side seemed to have no response. The room was drowning in silence. I could only hear Yukinoshita's breathing, as well as a small voice saying “Did she just.....”

I looked towards the source of that voice, and saw Yuigahama looking back and forth between me and Yukinoshita in surprise. Just as I wanted to ask her what the matter is, I heard a bored laughter at the other end.

“Oh, I understand. Hikki-kun is there with you now right? Pass him the phone.”

In this quiet room, her provocative voice reached my ears all the way from the phone. Met with Haruno-san's request, Yukinoshita seemed hesitant for that instant. But upon hearing the cold “Hurry up” urging her on, she sighed lightly, and passed the phone to me.

“..... My sister wants to speak with you.”

I took the phone silently from her and placed it close to my ear, and spoke slowly.

“.....What?”

“.....Hikigaya-kun, you are really kind.”

Her chuckle and scornful voice was both lovely and charming. I felt as though like I had been possessed by a goblin.

I was pretty sure that the smile on the other side of the phone, had a very twisted beauty to it. I could visualize that expression clearly in my mind. That expression was probably similar to hers, and yet, totally different at the same time.

I cleared my throat and looked at Yukinoshita, who didn't seem to have overheard anything.

Yukinoshita was hugging her chest and standing by the window. Her side profile faced the windows and she looked outside the window to avoid my gaze.

The streetlights and the red lights from the far away skyscrapers, were insufficient to chase away the descending darkness. From the glass, one could only see a black mirror.

The pair of eyes that were reflected in them, were ever so clear, and yet ever so empty.

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Haruno-san only said that one sentence before she hung-up. The conversation ended abruptly as such.

I took my handkerchief and lightly rubbed it against the screen of the phone before giving it back to her. A wave of fatigue washed over me. When I recovered from it, I realized that it was already quite late.

“Then, I will head back first.”

“Un.....”

I took my schoolbag and stood up at the same time as Yuigahama. One tempo later, Yukinoshita stood up as well. Seems like they were going to send me off.

“No, there’s no need to.”

“It feel strange to bid farewell here.”

Saying that, Yuigahama led the way by opening the room door. Then, at this instant, a fur ball sprang towards us at high speed from the corridor.

It was Yuigahama’s dog, Sable. Then, Sable collided with my body.

“Oh.....”

“Hey! Sable.”

Yuigahama lectured it and picked it up from beside my feet, where it was exposing its stomach to me, and hugged it. Yukinoshita saw Sable and quickly stopped walking. Oops, this girl really can’t handle dogs.

On the way to the entrance of her house, Yukinoshita followed behind Yuigahama, constantly keeping a distance of 3 steps away, trying her hardest not to have any interactions with Sable.

On the other hand, Sable kept was in high spirits, and kept barking restlessly in Yuigahama’s arms. Un.... Was this all right? I think I should probably give a word of advice to Yuigahama.

I wore my shoes, and as I proceeded to leave, said to Yuigahama.

“Hey, Yuigahama. If Yukinoshita is going to stay over then Sable will have to.....”

“Hikigaya-kun.”

Yukinoshita spoke to me in stern manner to block out my words. Her lips pouted, and she crossed her arms in front of her chest as she glared at me. I see, so you didn't want me to say that you were afraid of dogs. Well, the reason was probably she couldn't bring herself to say that she was afraid of something that her friend greatly loved.

She would probably feel sorry if she had to let Yuigahama worry about her on top of the trouble she had already caused by staying the night.

If that's so, then I will respect her wishes.

However, it was all too common that one could not just take back his words after one had spoken them.

Yuigahama asked in a puzzled tone.

“Sable? What about it?”

facing such a question, I didn't really have any good replies.

“Un. Ah Sable might be a little bit lonely, but learning how to bear with will be good training for him. Especially so for him.”

“Un. He will be fine!”

Although the words were hastily made up on the spot, Yuigahama nodded her vigorously. Oh, you actually believe in that 'training' I felt that it didn't really listen to Yuigahama at all..... As I thought that, Yuigahama dropped her shoulders and spoke.

“.....Because here at home, Sable always go around bugging Mama.”

“Oh, so that's how it is.....”

This doggie sure had a strong sense of 'caste'. It probably wouldn't care for people like Yuigahama. However, that would mean that the frequency at which it approach Yukinoshita was going to be low. Also, she could take this as an opportunity to be more used to dogs.

"Then, I am going now."

Saying that, I gently stroked Sable's head, who was being carried by Yuigahama.

"Un. Good bye."

"Goodbye."

The two of them saw me off. After walking along the corridor for a while, I could hear the lonely barks of Sable. I pushed all my thoughts of Yuigahama's house to the back of my head.

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After heading home and eating dinner, I snuggled under the kotatsu and rolled about, and proceed to read my book.

My parents, who in this rare occasion had arrived home early, had already fallen asleep. The living room now only had me and Komakura. But then, Komakura was already curled up in a ball on top of the blanket on the kotatsu and was asleep. The only one who was awake was me.

Then, the living room door opened slightly, and Komachi walked in, wearing her pajamas and nightcap.

"You are still awake?"

"Un. I am going to sleep, but I want to do something first."

As I said so, Komachi walked towards the kitchen.

“Whatever, sleep early.”

“Un.”

Although my heart was uneasy, as I had wanted to ask her whether it was really all right to be still awake at this hour given that she had her examinations tomorrow, but all she did was to give me a carefree reply of Un. Then, the sound of Chichichi could be heard from the stove.

As I was thinking about whether she was cooking something to eat, I heard her looking for something from the racks. As I thought about whether her inability to sleep was caused by hunger, she had walked back to the kotatsu

“Here, take this.”

“Un, ah, thank you.”

Komachi gave me a can of MAX coffee. I took it from here and felt some warmth in it. Seems like she had heated it up by placing it in a tin with hot water. The girl sure is amazing.....

“Onii-chan, your legs are in the way.”

Saying that, she kicked my feet aside as she snuggled into the kotatsu. Then, the two of us started sipping our hot coffee.

Komachi sighed contentedly.

“.....Tomorrow’s the day.”

“Yes. Hurry up and sleep when you are done drinking this. Afterall, this is the day before your exams.”

Well, you could get a good sleep if you drink a can of warm coffee. Will this can of coffee be appraised as a medicinal item in future? My heart was beating quickly. Heh heh, good effect. If one were to say this and drink it at the same time, then one could feel this sort of unnatural feeling amidst the unnatural sweetness. I highly recommend everyone to do the same.

However, this didn't seem to be what Komachi was thinking of.

".....Not that, it's Valentine. As a guy, shouldn't you be all excited and thrilled?"

She sighed, her face was one of surprise.

To think that she was thinking about this one day before her exams..... The princess of this household sure had guts. Seems like there was no need for me to ask her, "if she was ready".

"I definitely won't be like that. You could say that my mind is only thinking about Komachi now."

"That's because Onii-chan pampers Komachi too much. Gross. It would be better to pamper yourself in this manner."

"I am already pampering myself."

"That's not what I meant. No, you are obviously pampering yourself with all that sugar."

I continued to sip my coffee as I spoke. Komachi started laughing all of a sudden. Wait, did she just say some terrible things about me casually?

If you around calling your brother gross, I might really just do something gross to you. Hence, I smacked my hands against the kotatsu, behaving like a spoiled child and making a fuss. I really am gross.

“Right, speaking of sweet things, give me chocolate, give me chocolate.”

“I have already given you something equivalent to that.”

Komachi motioned at the coffee with her chin. No no, this was nothing like it. This wasn't even anything like coffee. I couldn't feel the love, the love.

“.....Komachi, do you like your Onii-chan?”

“Nope.”

Komachi replied instantly with a laughter of indifference. Woo, woo, unintentionally, I started whimpering.

So mean..... Well, this was proof that we could get along so well to the point that we could have this sort of conversation face to face.

Whether we were joking or bantering, or about our likes and dislikes, no matter what the content of our answer was, we would be speak our true feelings from the bottom of our hearts.

The fifteen years that we had spent together were not just for show.

Then, what about that pair of sisters, and also between her and her mother?

They have been together for even longer than fifteen years, and stayed under the same roof, possessing the same memories and recollections, with the same values. Despite all that, even when they crossed paths, they still do not understand each other, so then, how would they be able to interact with other people normally?

Our brother-sister relationship could not be established without Komachi. In fact, there were many things that I had to thank Komachi for.

.....However, that is that, and chocolates are chocolates.

“Hurry up and give me chocolates.....”

Seeing me breaking down in tears, Komachi sighed with frustration, crawled out of the kotatsu and went somewhere.

Seems like she couldn't take it any more..... Just as I lay down on the kotatsu in despair, Komachi rushed back to the kotatsu.

“Here.”

Then, she thrust herself onto my back and passed me something.

I turned my head, and that thing was a beautifully wrapped chocolate.

“.....What's this, for me?”

“Well, it's just something simple. Since you asked for it.....”

Komachi seemed sort of unhappy as she answered me. I hugged this box of chocolate tightly, and kept repeating my thanks as my hot tears streamed down. She specially prepared this for me, right. My sister was really amazing.....

Seeing me bawling, Komachi had a shocked expression on her face as she gave a bitter smile.

“I would be really happy if you could say those willful words to someone else other than me.”

“Who else but you can I speak these embarrassing words to.....? Come to think of it, there’s no value in receiving anything that was given only when they were asked.”

The instant I said that, Komachi glared at me.

“Then by that logic, my chocolate is worthless?”

“.....n, Ah, no..... It’s not like that? Komachi’s chocolate is different. It’s special. Komachi is the cutest and the very best.”

“You really are not being serious about this, you trash of a brother.”

Komachi sighed deeply with a fed up expression, mouthing out the words, “Uwa-”

“.....However, if someone like you who isn’t good at deception, can accept my chocolate, I guess I am still a little happy about that.”

Komachi said so with a much more mature smile than usual. She placed her chin on her hands as she lay down in the kotatsu, tilted her head, and she looked at me directly, her gaze ever so warm.

I felt kind of embarrassed to be at the receiving end of such a kind gaze and inhaled rapidly, then I averted my eyes. Then, perhaps owing to her embarrassment as well, she laughed in a most unnatural way.

“What, was that high in Komachi points just now?”

“No, if you are referring to just now, then that was really low in points.”

I gulped down the last of the sweet lukewarm coffee, my face a bitter expression.

This coffee was so sweet that my mouth had slackened from drinking it.

"Then, I guess I should go sleep now."

"Oh, go and sleep then."

Komachi took the empty cans and proceeded to throw them in the rubbish bin in the kitchen. When Komachi walked to the doorway, Komakura who had awoken, followed her in small steps from behind.

"Oh, Ka-kun. Let's sleep together?"

Komakura did not meow in response, but rubbed its head against Komachi's feet. Komachi gave a small giggle in satisfaction when she saw that, and pulled Komakura up for a hug and placed her hand on the door.

I called out from behind her.

"Komachi."

"What?"

One of her hand was holding the door handle as she turned half her body back.

"I will be rooting for you. Good night."

"Un. Thank you. I will do my best. Good night."

Although Komachi didn't say much, but her smile was there. She picked up Komakura up again, and returned to her room.

I watched her leave, placed my arm behind my head and lay down as such.

"Not good at deception....."

Those were the words that Komachi had used to describe me, but the me of today could not readily accept that with conviction.

I would never try and get close to others, but, neither would I take the initiative to distance myself from others.

I was aware of what I was doing, drawing a clear line, plainly covering it up, trying harder than usual to dull it, not dwelling on it, playing the role of the observer to the extreme. I had always known that I was placing myself in an unfair position.

In order to not confront it, to not acknowledge the discomfort and unease that had always been bugging me, I had chosen to keep my distance.

I was more than aware of it, that I did this so that I would not make any blunder. I know that there is only one answer and that this was not it. Even so, I still wanted to suppress them.

That is why, this was probably why that person could see through my intentions.

Once more, a voice from within tormented me.

Are you really such a person, Hikigaya Hachiman? Is this really what you wish for, you bastard?

Stupid noisy fellow. Don't just go running your mouth and shut the hell up when you don't know anything about me.

In the end, from then on, I lapsed into silence.

Chapter 8

[No matter when, Yuigahama Yui's gaze is as warm and gentle as always]

That day, an unusual snow fell. It does not usually snow in Chiba. The wet clouds that flow forth from the Sea of Japan were obstructed by the many mountain ranges that form the back bone of Honshu.

Thus, when the snow does fall, the dry winds from the side of the Pacific that normally accompanies it will assail the particularly flat plains of Chiba. However, it can occasionally snow at an odd timing in this way. In my 17 years of experience, I have encountered snowstorms occurring at the start of the New Year, the Coming of Age day⁴⁹, or suddenly at the end of March. The timing could not be more unfortunate, as it coincides with Komachi's school entrance exam. Fortunately enough, the wind was not blowing.

The flower petals were fluttering about in the dancing snow.

Clad in her usual school uniform with her coat and mufflers, she wore her gloves and her feet was decked out in a pair of leather boots. She was more than well-prepared as she set off from the doorway. It was still far from her exam time, but it was probably for the best, owing to the traffic congestion that I fear will probably occur.

"Do you have the entrance exam label? What about your eraser, handkerchief and pentagonal pencil?" ⁵⁰This pentagonal pencil was amongst one of the several goods bought by our dad during our shrine visit to the Shrine to pray for her entrance exam's success.

A cross sectional view of the pencil reveals its pentagonal shape. Well, with the exception of that, it is otherwise a normal pencil. To be frank, I thought that an ordinary pencil would be just as easy to write with. Afterall, the sides of the pentagonal pencils of test takers' were written with A - E, or 1 - 5 or otherwise ア - オ and some form of notation. Each time you come across a multiple-choice question that you do not know, you will be praying to the pencil that will determine your life. Rather, I

⁴⁹ Japanese Holiday on the 2nd monday of January. To celebrate those who have reached the age of 20.

⁵⁰ [Yes, it exists.](<http://www.amazon.com/Hinodewashi-pentagonal-pencil-A-854-B-square/dp/B00O2SV9VK>)

think it would be better to say that the pencil was created for the sake of determining your life.

Komachi took one last brief glance at her bag, and gave an energetic nod. With that, she tilted her umbrella and gave a salute.

"I'm set! Well then, Onii-chan, I will be on my way now!"

"Oh, off you go then. Watch your step."

"Okay. Brrrrr, it's cold. Sin, cosine, tangent... Ah, it does not appear to come to this."

Shivering, she seemed to be humming a tune whilst blurting out something as she trudged along steadily. As I sent her off, there was that small bit of anxiety in me. She'll probably be all right. I wonder if too much studying was the cause of this strange high-spiritedness in her...

In any case, it was finally time to welcome the day of the entrance exams. After having come this way, there was nothing left to do but to struggle. Though the actual time for it has not arrived, struggling and writhing as we approached the deadline for the exams has become a norm in this world.

Speaking of things that I could do, there was nothing left I could do but to offer my prayers, and leave it up to the Heavens.

The low-hanging massive clouds was a sign that clear weather was not going to be coming soon, just the sound of heavy snowfall with the white snow falling from the sky. It seems like it was going to snow the whole day long.

I shivered at the cold, and started to walk back to my house. At that time, once again, I shivered as I walked.

I reached into my pocket to discover the source of the vibration, to find out that it was an incoming call. The display indicated that it was from [★☆Yui☆★]. Yuigahama. From the time this contact was first entered, it has not changed, and it has stayed that way ever since.

I was troubled for several seconds over whether I should pick up the call. However, the call continued on uninterrupted and my hand phone continued on vibrating. Giving up, I pushed the Answer button and held it gently to my ear.

“... .. Hello”

At the instant I spoke, I heard a cheerful voice replying from the mouthpiece at the bottom of my phone.

“Hikki, let’s go on a date!”

“.... .. Huh?”

The first thing that she said wasn’t any form of greetings or anything, but a few unexpected words. I was left dumbstruck by her whilst a high pitched “Pshhh – tsuuuu” escaped from the side of my mouth.

Since receiving the phone call, I slowly began my preparations to leave. Just as I was about to leave, I took a glance at the traffic information on my smartphone just in case. It seemed that the congestion on the route I am planning to take was easing up now. At least, there wasn’t any need for me to worry about reaching the meeting place on time now.

In practice, the Kanto transportation network was really pathetic when dealing with snow. This was especially so in Chiba Prefecture, thanks to the Edo River and the Tone River that surround the borders of Chiba prefecture. Since having a bridge over them was not possible, this island is seriously going to become a lonely island. At this rate, there was the risk that would be a proclamation of the establishment of the [Independent state of Chiba]. Even when I went outside, the weather looked the same as always, the asphalt was becoming frosty owing to the snow that had started to accumulate.

The extent of snowfall was still not deep enough to trip me up, but it was easy to slip on it due to its sherbet-like condition. ⁵¹I walked slowly on the road to the bus stop whilst following the tracks made by car

⁵¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bzysWK5cWeI>

wheels and footprints. It took a while to transfer from the bus to the train. One could view the ocean from the train's windows. From the window, I could see the snow falling lightly, drifting from the right to the left. The sun was at a great height, and shone through the grey cloudy sky, illuminating it with a shade of white.

The routes along the coasts were somewhat crowded. This was not just due to the weather. That route was usually crowded whenever there was an event. For example, at the Makuhari Messe⁵², there could be a Game Show or a Motor Show, or a big site where the Comic Market(See: Comiket) resides, or a live event at the Shin-Kiba station. It was at those times whereby it would be particularly congested.

Above all, one station along this route, was home to Japan's grandest attraction. It was an establishment known as the Tokyo Disney Resort, or TDR in short.

Especially since today was Valentine's Day.

Even though it was snowing, it still appeared to be receiving a great deal of customers. I pricked up my ears to listen to the conversation between the couples that were on the same train as me. What's up with them being all romantic? They look like they even welcome this snowfall!

Indeed, for a Valentine's Day date, I guess it was an undisputedly good situation to be in.

Soon, in the direction of the train's movement, a white castle and the rising plumes of smoke from a volcano ⁵³ came into view. An announcement inside the train informed the passengers that the train would be stopping at the next station, and the train began to slowly decelerate.

⁵² [Makuhari Messe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Makuhari_Messe)

⁵³ Volcano -> Tokyo Disney Sea. Part of the Tokyo Disneyland Resorts.

With a dull shake, the train came to a halt. The door opened with a Pshhh-tsuu sound. The cold air and the snow blew into the compartment, and then the couples that had boarded before me disembarked. Then, the doors closed and a bell echoed. The characteristic “Disney” music of the train station was used as the melody for the train’s departure. As I listened to it, the number of people in the train gradually diminished, allowing me to lean against the train’s door. The white castle and the active volcano gradually became more distant, fading away from my left eye’s vision.

Today was not the day I got off at this station.
At one time or another, I had the vague notion that one day or another, we would surely visit this place together, but it didn’t happen.

The unspoken promise, the words that were exchanged no longer took the form that it was supposed to be. With a few changes, it shall still be carried out. The meeting place where new promises would be exchanged, lies in the one station ahead.

Passing the big bridge, through the river near the border, an enormous Ferris wheel came into view. Indeed, it truly is Japan’s largest Ferris wheel.

I recalled the phone call from this morning. It was not out of bewilderment nor surprise that I did not reject the unexpected words that came out from her mouth. In the first place, the one who first invited her was me. [S1EP12, S2EP9] This was just a continuation of what I have had always procrastinated.

There was no particular reason to reject her.

However, was this really okay? Such a doubt suddenly flashed across my mind. As I searched for the answer within, the velocity of the train dropped. Regardless of my purpose for thinking about it, the train’s motion stopped suddenly with one large jerk, along with my thoughts. Exiting from the ticketing gate, the large Ferris wheel leaped into my vision. From the water fountain piazza at the front of the station, one

could see what I would definitely say was one of Japan's largest Ferris wheel. The appeal was amazing when you looked at it up close.

I moved serenely through the flickering snow.

With a sidelong glance at the huge Ferris wheel, I began to trudge along. Thanks to the fact that this place was small since it was intended for families, one could not possibly get lost in here. Checking the memories of that time against the information on the information board, I hurried towards the destination.

Proceeding along the long main street that leads to the seaside, a dome shaped structure eventually came into view on my left. Below it was the entrance hole to the aquarium.

The place that we were meant to meet was there.

Upon reaching underneath the roof of the building, I closed my umbrella. Taking a brief look at my surroundings, I then broke into a run.

There were not many people here even for a weekday. Thanks to that, I immediately spotted the figure of Yuigahama who was clad in a blue coat.

"Hikki!"

She was probably on the train before me. Yuigahama was walking towards me, calling out my name, and waving the pink colored plastic umbrella in her hand.

I nodded in reply to her and trotted slowly towards her.

However, my feet suddenly came to a halt.

"... .. Ah"

The hem of a grey colored coat was fluttering behind Yuigahama.

The one person who stood directly behind Yuigahama turned to face me, her eyes wide open in surprise.

“Hikigaya-kun...”

The murmur came from Yukinoshita Yukino. Why was she here? I wondered doubtfully as the two of us faced each other.

“Yukinoshita came here as well?”

It was plain to see without us having to say it. The situation was hard to comprehend. It seemed to be the same for Yukinoshita as well.

Yuigahama caught a glimpse of Yukinoshita twisting her body uncomfortably. Then, she opened her mouth anxiously.

“Uh, Um..... If, if you two had plans, then I shall go back...”
“It’s fine! Let go have fun together!”

With that, Yuigahama held onto Yukinoshita’s arm, who looked ready to go back at any moment. At the same time, she tugged at my sleeve. Yuigahama bent downwards, took our hands and pressed them tightly to her chest.

“I want the three of us to go together.....” The sound of her murmur ended with a whisper. With her eyes lowered, I had no way of telling her facial expression. However, the beseeching tone in her voice was more than sufficient to convey her desires. Yukinoshita and I looked at each other, both of us were at a loss for words. Yukinoshita’s gaze continued to wander about and she let out a bewildered sigh. Nevertheless, after considering how Yuigahama was lifting her head and her looking at us with such a gentle expression in her eyes, Yukinoshita nodded along with a small sigh. And then, Yuigahama turned her gaze towards me.

Seeing that the two of them had no particular objections, I had no objections either. However, there was just one thing that I wanted to hear. I hesitated to ask her directly, and averted my eyes from her a little. It seemed to a terribly awkward thing to ask now after all this time. The words that could smooth it over just wouldn't come. Somehow or another, I managed to open my mouth and squeezed some words out.

"... .. This, is this really fine?"

"Yes, this is fine" Yuigahama replied immediately.

Without averting her eyes, she looked at me directly, her expression was one that looked forced.

There was no hidden meaning behind the words in my question, it was straightforward. This was probably true for her reply as well. No, I wonder about that. I wondered if there really was no further meaning behind those surprisingly simple words. No matter which was it, if this was Yuigahama's wish, then I don't really have any reason to object to it.

"I see."

"Yup! There is no need to worry about the snow here. It would be great if everyone here can have fun!" Yuigahama puffed out her chest proudly in reply. Indeed, if you say that everyone could enjoy themselves here, then this place was probably the appropriate place to be.

That place, it seems to be a little bit of a bother to go there as three. That's why, just maybe, once more on another day. That day will probably come whereby I have to fulfill the promise.

"Okay, let's go."

The place here today, belongs to everyone.

In the distance, I noticed the glare of the sun shining through the glass dome. Despite the many sheets of glass that made up this dome,

unfortunately, looking at the weather, the light from the sun seems to have gathered. Coupled with the tall ceiling, it gave off a feel of considerable brightness. An escalator went around the side of the Aquarium Park, continuing on in a descending fashion, towards the bottom where it was dark.

The light on the ground that appeared in the distance was like those found in the cinema right before the start of a screening. The expectations I had caused my heart to throb. And thus, after getting off that long escalator, the first thing that I saw was the screen that showcased the large water tank ahead. Wow, this is really big, Yuigahama said so upon seeing it and ran towards it with a light pitter-patter of footsteps.

“Sharks!” Yuigahama was talking about the sharks in the tanks. There were Blacktip reef sharks and other varieties it seemed. Nonetheless, the blacktip reef shark, in spite of sounding like a tuna, it really isn’t one. It’s a shark. A super shark.⁵⁴ Also in the same tank, there were sea breams and flounders dancing. If you wanted to see something else, there were also the stingrays and sardines. Yuigahama went about the tank happily, peering through the camera’s lenses to take pictures. And now, she faced sideways. “Ehehe” she laughed and pointed once more to the tank whilst saying “Sharks!”

“Sharks, is it?” Yukinoshita caught up to her with a perplexed expression that was not missed by Yuigahama. Her voice was interspersed with some sense of awe. Thereupon, Yuigahama went “Ahaha” with an awkward laugh whilst gently stroking the bun of her hairstyle and approached Yukinoshita without hesitation.

“Yukinon, sorry for not telling you about this. Come on, let’s get our spirits up!”

“Even if you say that...”

⁵⁴ Wordplay. Blacktip reef sharks = [ツマグロ]. Tuna = [マグロ]

I stood in front of the tank, indifferent to their conversations. Yuigahama just stood there silently.

Freaking sharks. Sharks were awesome. I looked on dreamily. The view that was floating in front of me was one that was remarkably calm, moreover, one that had the appearance of elegance.

A scalloped hammerhead. Thanks to its characteristic form, there was no need for me to go the extra mile to read its information board to know its name. Those who were guys, they had at least been attracted to sharks once in their childhood. To put it more precisely, it was a time whereby we really love things such as the dinosaur or ocean pictorial books.

Hikigaya Hachiman. When I was three, the dinosaur that I liked was the Triceratops and my favorite deep-sea fish was the barrel-eyed fish. I was definitely a boy when I said things like that. I was staring at the tank so intently that an unintentional “Oops” leaked out of my mouth. I was really like a young boy who was entranced by the show windows’ trumpet. ⁵⁵The feeling of Tutti! It totally captivated me. ⁵⁶

“Woah!.... Hammerhead sharks! Eh what, you are allowed to take pictures in here?” Whilst pointing my finger at the shark, I listened to Yuigahama who was nodding her head and going “Uh-huh” like an elder sister.

Wow, so it’s really fine to take pictures huh. Pasha-pasha, went the camera shutter. Out of the corner of my eyes, I could see Yuigahama walking with small quick steps towards Yukinoshita. Then, she whispered into her ears.

“Look! Even Hikki is enjoying himself as well.”

“Haaa.... ...”

Yukinoshita exhaled a sigh that sounded like she had given up.

⁵⁵ Probably a reference to the manga by Rieko Saibara about Louis Armstrong.

⁵⁶ Hibike Euphonium reference(?) トウッティ！私たちが心を奪う is the ED opening line. In the LN it's, トウッティ！って感じ。めっちゃ心奪われる。

At this point, the whispered conversation next to me ceased to be heard. Noticing the unusual silence, I stole a sideways glance. Pressing her hand to her forehead whilst staring fixedly in my direction, our eyes met.

“Wh... .. What?”

Embarrassed that I was actually focusing on them so intently that I could listen to their conversation, Yukinoshita swept away the hair by her shoulder smoothly. Then, she gave me a smile to tease me a little.

“It’s nothing. I was just a little surprised, that’s all. I could take a photo of you with the sharks.” With that said, she stretched out her hand. Apparently, it looked like I would be getting a commemorative photo of the Scalloped Hammerhead shark if I passed her my phone.

“Seriously? I can boast about it to Komachi then”

Taking up on her offer, I gently passed her my phone, taking great care so as to not touch the screen with my fingertips.

“Hammerhead shark. When the hammerhead shark comes, press the camera shutter! It would be good if you could do it when the shark is seen from the side, so that the hammer portion is visible. “

“It’s surprisingly that you are so detailed in your specification.....”

Yukinoshita gave a frown whilst taking several shots as though it was some form of challenge. What on earth was so funny that had Yuigahama, who was just beside me, grinning away?

“How are these pictures?”

Looking at my phone that was returned, it was there as I had specified, there was one photo taken that seemed to be the best timing, where I looked as if I was being completely swallowed by the hammerhead shark.

“Oh-ho! These are great!”

“I see. That’s great to hear.”

A breath leaked out from Yukinoshita, one that seemed a little tired mixed with relief. Yuigahama held on to Yukinoshita’s arm tightly and gave it a few light tugs.

“Okay then, let’s go on the next one!”

“... .. Okay”

Returning her smile, Yukinoshita followed Yuigahama. Yukinoshita was reluctant about it at the start, but this Aquarium Park had surpassed her expectations and she was now keen on it. Bidding farewell to the hammerhead sharks that I was reluctant to part with, I followed the two of them from behind.

In the Aquarium Park, since it was a weekday, there were just a sporadic amount of people. I could see the occasional quiet old couples, couples who brought along their babies, the others were young females with their friends and people who were relatively quiet.

If this was the weekends or holidays, this place would probably be jammed with children and their families.

The gloomy area was illuminated with a number of the water tanks. In a spectacle like this filled with several theatres, everyone seemed to be naturally keeping their voices low. We were no different. I let out a cry of amazement when I saw the impressiveness of the giant water tank that housed the Bluefin tuna.

The “Seas of the World” area was divided into various groups. The water tank which contained the fishes of the Southern Ocean captivated me with its dazzling display.

Nature's grandeur, power and beauty. When we saw the spectacle in front of us, we couldn't help but to say words like "Amazing", "Pretty" and "Looks Delicious". Wait, what... looks delicious?

There, of course, there will be those who think differently.

Anyway, when Mr Fish-san passed by in front of us, Yuigahama stopped walking suddenly. Enticed by her movements, Yukinoshita and I stopped as well. At a glance, it appeared to be a rather dark and simple fish tank, a far cry from the much more colorful fish tanks in the surrounding.

Here, light did not shine through, and thin strips of wood were stack up on top of the soil in a solitary manner. In the midst of it, there was a fish that seemed to be swimming about dejectedly. It gave off the feeling that it was a nubot.⁵⁷

No, perhaps it was wrong to say that it was swimming. It was not even moving much, it seemed to be just floating around.

"Ughhh, so gross." Yuigahama murmured casually.

"It's a nursery fish, apparently."

"They live in muddy streams and don't swim around much."

Yukinoshita read out the explanation and then she cast a glance at me.

Why was this person looking this way? I looked at the explanation board, the explanation is not done yet!

Oh? And they instantly gobble up prawns and stuff that happen to swim in front of them.

"They seem to be living the ideal life....."

"You are empathizing with them?!"

Yuigahama reacted in shock to my thoughts that I unintentionally let slip. Upon hearing it, Yukinoshita smiled all of a sudden.

⁵⁷ Someone/thing with no emotion.

"Now that you mention it, this fish, it does resemble someone. Right, Hikifishy-kun?"

"We are totally not alike. Neither are our names."

Why was she smiling at me? Well, it seems that the nursery fish's other name was Komoriuo. I guess that would mean that the fish is a baby-sitter. ⁵⁸If that's the case, then I was nothing like these Hikikomori fishes No, babysitting is actually an awesome idea too, for me. I love small kids!

With an ecstatic expression and some giggling, she spoke in a cheerful tone.

"Ugggh, gross."

"Don't say they are gross, they are trying their best to live."

Are we not from the same planet? I mean, this person seems to be a bit too happy saying that..... As Yuigahama continued to be engrossed in the nursery fish, Yukinoshita squatted down beside her. The two of them then exchanged words such as "Gross, isn't it?" and "Disgusting, right?"

Then, Yuigahama smiled suddenly.

"But..... they are kind of cute isn't it?"

"I don't know if you could label them as cute, but they certainly are endearing."

And with that said, Yukinoshita and Yuigahama met each other's gaze and both chuckled.

"I am pretty sure "cute" is out of the question after calling them gross....."

⁵⁸ Wordplay on the fish's name. コモリウオ and baby-sitter(こもり) The latter is the hiragana version of コモリ

More than anything, nursery fishes sure had a disgusting face. Are you sure you are really calling that “cute”?

I totally don't understand girls and their sense of “cute”. Isn't that so? Her behavior was cute or her hairstyle was cute or her voice was cute. Wasn't this what guys say when they are introducing the girls at a mixer or their friends? Wasn't this just a roundabout way of saying that they are actually not cute at all? I have sort of seen that kind of thing on the net. Seriously, you really can't believe girls when they say something is cute.

The porcupine fish with the clownfish. Seahorses, leafy sea-dragons. The left-eye flounders on the left with the right-eyed flounders on the right. Lastly, the largehead hairtail, the Japanese sea-lily.....

Following the usual route that was linked to the outside, we saw a large number of deep sea fishes from the “Seas of the World” exhibit.

Due to us having spent some time in the long, dark area, it was most unfortunate for us when the sun came dazzling through. After exiting the automatic door, we arrived at the outside hallway, where the cold breeze from the sea caressed our cheeks. At the same time, I was met with a wave of strong fragrance.

This seems to be the place where tide pools make a reappearance. The crabs, acorn barnacles, or perhaps the starfish was just some of the many creatures that could be found on the seashore. One could gaze at the sky if one was to continue walking forward as they would exit out from the roof. The snow now was not heavy, and it was considerably lighter, flickering about. Moreover, after hearing that the weather's fickleness was due to the influence from the recent cold wave, I didn't know what to expect anymore. In any case, as of this time, the weather this afternoon seems to be good, which means we didn't need to worry about it.

“Ah, it seems that there is a crowd gathered there.”

Just as I was worrying about the weather, Yuigahama who was walking in front of us, turned around and point her finger at the front. Just exactly how many people were gathered in front? The raised voices coming ahead sounded like they were having fun with shouts of “Kyaaa” and “Waaa”.

“Let’s go and have a look.”

Saying that, we went to the area to see what spot it was that was causing such a stir. The pathway outside that was along the side led to a small and long pool that resembled the fish tank from indoors. However, unlike the other fish tanks, it was not covered. The water surface was exposed to the surrounding air. At a glance, the explanation board on the wall had the words “Touch them gently with two fingers” written on it.

Apparently, this seemed like a place whereby you could have the experience of touching the animals. Eh, what kind of sea creatures am I allowed to touch, I wondered as I peered into the water tank. Sharks. Once again, it was the sharks in there.

The tiny variants of sharks and rays were swimming about lazily in there. Looking at the explanation board, I saw the words イヌザメ (Brown banded bamboo sharks), ネコザメ (Japanese Bullhead sharks), ⁵⁹, stingrays and pitted stringrays written on it.

“Hey, Hikki, it’s a catshark!”

Yuigahama struck my two arms excitedly, whilst looking intently at the catsharks. And so, every now and then, she touched it with her fingers. It didn’t give any particular response, but rather just remained there quietly. Soon, Yuigahama nodded her head as though she was convinced of something.

⁵⁹ Their names may suggest catsharks and dogsharks, but they actually both belong the same group of "catsharks".

‘..... It kind of feels like Sable!’

How? Because it’s also light-brown in colour? This shark, it totally does not feel like a dog okay? I mean, this resembles your dog? Are you sure this is really a dog? Isn’t this a shark? However, I had no idea why they are called cat-sharks. Cocking my head in puzzlement, it seems like there was one more person who had the same question as me.

Right beside me, Yukinoshita was stroking her chin, observing the cat sharks closely. The Japanese Bullhead shark was one or two times smaller than the brown banded bamboo sharks, its body also had a characteristic striped pattern on it, making them easy to distinguish from one another.

“Cat-sharks...”

Yukinoshita stood there muttering a few words, her gaze unwavering from the swimming cat-sharks.

“It doesn’t make sense. In what way are the catsharks like a cat? Naming them as such, surely there must be a part of them that resembles cats.”

Oh, she really just can’t help but to respond to anything that has the word “cat” associated with it huh? Seriously, she really loves cats like how cats loves Frisky.

Seeming to have made a resolve, Yukinoshita rolled up her sleeves and extended her hand excitedly towards the catshark, and patted it for quite some time. And then, she gave a contented smile all of a sudden.

“I guess it really does feel like a cat’s tongue to the touch.”

“That, is just how shark’s skin feels like, you know.”

Yukinoshita did not appear to have heard what I just said and continuing stroking the catshark without a care in the world.

“Cat, catshark, cat..... “Meow” No, “Shaaaa”, maybe.”

“Just because they are sharks doesn’t mean they go shaaaaa”

Anyway, the main point is that sharks do not produce any sound..... Maybe, probably. With that thought, I noticed that Yuigahama seemed to have moved on from the catsharks and appeared to be searching for a new target. Yuigahama’s wandered about in the water.

“Ahh, there are eels here too!”

Saying that, Yuigahama simply extended out her hands with an “Eitto”. It was just a ray, huh. Definitely was going to be a mistake. Uh-huh.

“Hyaa!?”

There, she shrieked almost instantly, followed by a swift retraction of her fingers.

“I just touched something slimy! So slimy!”

Saying that in a manner that sounded like she was about to break into tears, Yukinoshita was awoken from her daze about the catsharks and rushed over to Yuigahama and asked her in a concerned voice.

“What did you touch? Hikigaya-kun? You’d better wash your hands quick.”

Wait, what? Could you please stop treating me like a ray? I don’t excrete mucus alright? No, if the girls were to touch their hands that were covered in sweat, surely it would most certainly resemble that of an eel? I will be sure to wash my hands properly if I come into contact with any girls!

However, despite saying that, one does not get many opportunities to get to touch a shark or a ray. I too, rolled up my sleeves and began to touch the catsharks and eels to my heart’s content.

The coarse and slimy feel was really enjoyable. Next to me, Yuigahama had withdrawn her hand. However, I saw that she continued to look at the catsharks with a look of adoration.

“What? Are you sure you don’t want to stroke them anymore?”

“Yep! I think they would be tired out if I touched them too much.”

“I see, that’s so like you, Yuigahama”

I unintentionally let out a smile. Indeed, if one were to stroke animals indiscriminately, it would probably stress them out. Our cat for example, would give me a cat punch if I were to stroke it. I honestly preferred that way of showing that it’s stressed out.

The words that came out of mouth were spoken ever so casually. Yet, Yuigahama stared at the ground, avoiding my gaze and her shoulders shook with a twitch.

“..... Just like me, I wonder about that?”

My gaze followed her. The falling snow danced as they fell, causing ripples on the water surface. Yuigahama slowly raised her head to look at me.

“.....I, I am not as nice as you think I am, Hikki.”

Those eyes were like telling of the distance between us, just like the fleeting smile she wore on her face.

The whisper added as an afterthought seemed to be more of a monologue.

Hearing that, I held my breath.

What the heck am I doing? I said that it was just like Yuigahama Yui, but what exactly did I mean by that?

Once again, the discomfort within my body came creeping out, causing my chest to shudder. Gripping my fist strongly, I realized I had

probably overlooked something serious that was causing this uneasiness to gush forth. Even so, I have to say something, but try as I might, the right words just wouldn't come out of my mouth. I saw her trembling lips, the lonely smile on her and her cast-down eyes.

Without a voice, without anything being said, the surrounding noise got much louder.

Therein, "Kyui~~" a high pitched cry reverberated throughout.

Upon hearing that, Yuigahama looked up, recovering her composure quickly.

"Ahh, penguins! Hikki, Yukinon, let's go!"

Yuigahama said that spiritedly. She called out to Yukinoshita and gazed at her, to which Yukinoshita looked in my direction with a dazed look. Taken aback by her, I returned her gaze. However, her eyes wandered back and forth between us, showing her concern for us both.

"Let's go?"

"Yup! Let's go."

Yukinoshita looked at her cheerfully, and returned her words with a helpless smile. I wondered if she had overheard our conversational exchange just now. She might have seen that expression on Yuigahama. Yuigahama took Yukinoshita's arm, and quickly walked in the direction of the rocky mountain. That stride seemed to be light.

Looking at the figure from behind, it was deliberately trying to be happy. Maybe I felt that way due to the talk that had concluded just now. Now, was the time when the three of us would enjoy ourselves, just like what was said.

Spitting out a breath to try and change the mood, I continued to follow the two girls from behind.

After walking a short while, we saw a bleak rocky mountain stretched out in front of us. There, there were many penguins exchanging cries of “Kyuuui” “Kyuuuu”. They were leaping into the pool with a splash or otherwise sticking to the side of the rock to get some warmth from the shade of it.

“Waa, so cute!”

“I agree.”

Yuigahama was in high spirits as she snapped photos of the penguins. That smile as could be seen from the side, was from Yukinoshita who was clicking away multiple times on the shutter discreetly. As I expected, Penguin-san was a great hit amongst girls.

I thought they were cool as well. Despite its streamlines shape, it still had a round figure. Its round eyes, the way it waddles about as it walks. I was totally in love with it.

“No way, they are so freaking cute! I must send some pictures to Komachi!”

As they approached the fence, I waited till the last possible minute so that they filled up the screen before my camera went “Pasha” “pasha” as I snapped their pictures.

And so, in the meantime, the flashes went off.

If Komachi sees them, then when she was done examining them, she would be like “Komachi wants to go too!” This was logic that was self-evident. And then I would be “Alright, let’s go then!” to which Komachi would respond in a cute and innocent way. I would then be able to go on a lawful date with my sister! NURUFUFUUUFUFUFUFUFU.

Just as I had made my devious plan, Yuigahama and Yukinoshita had already proceeded to another location. Ah, damn, they are leaving me behind!

Concluding my photo-taking in a hurry, I chased after Yuigahama and Yukinoshita. The two of them, proceeded along the pathway, and went to some stairs that continued down into the half basement.

In addition to the normal route in the penguin zone, there was also a space with a view of the enormous pool from the side. Here, one could observe the penguins swimming about. The penguins on land however, was showing a different style than the others. They were walking about on the land with dull heavy footsteps. The ones in the water were able to change direction with ease, and swimming about with amazing speed, making it seem as though they were actually flying about.

Upon seeing that, Yuigahama raised her voice in wonder, and continuously tugged at Yukinoshita's sleeve.

"Wow, amazing! Look at them swim! Doesn't this make you think they are birds or something like that?"

".....Uh, in the first place, penguins ARE birds."

Yukinoshita replied in a shocked tone. As though she had a headache, she pressed her hands against her temples. Hearing that, Yuigahama opened her mouth like a idiot and turned to look at the astonished me.

"..... I, I knew that!"

Yukinoshita gave a gentle smile to the flustered Yuigahama, whilst I gave a wry smile. No, I don't really know what I am feeling right now.

After enjoying the magnificence of the penguin's style as they swam about, we headed back up the stairs from the half basement. From here, we could see that the Humboldt penguins had gathered up in the rocky mountain and were squirming about. Therein, two penguins suddenly

caught my eye. They were intimately sticking closely to one another and grooming their feathers, and were frequently exchange cries.

Looking at them gave a pleasant feeling. Meanwhile, I took a glance at the explanation board in front of me. Yukinoshita and Yuigahama came beside me and pressed their faces forward to read it, all the while going "well now, let's see". I conceded the spot to the two of them and took half a step back, whilst my eyes followed the sentences on the board.

Apparently according to the explanation board that I saw, the two penguins that we saw that were snuggling up to each other were husband and wife. In many cases, Humboldt penguins in captivity often mate for life and so will continue to stay with the same partner until one of them dies. After reading it, I looked another look at the two penguins. It was then I realized Yukinoshita's shoulders in front of me was shaking, and knew that she was so gasping her breath due to her surprise.

And so, she left the area at a quick pace.

"What's wrong?"

Yukinoshita who had left first seemed to be in a hurry, but she nevertheless turned halfway back to look at me upon hearing the concerned voice.

".....I'll wait inside."

With those few words, she then headed back inside the park without looking back.

The penguin zone was an open air area. Taking into consideration the weather, now would probably be a good time to head back inside. The voice that told us that she would be going on ahead first, looking back, I saw that Yuigahama was still staring at the Humboldt Penguin. With her eyes partially closed, she gave a gentle gaze.

"I guess we should get going."

"Ah, umm. I want to see this a bit more before I go. I still want to take a wee bit more pictures! You go on ahead!"

Saying that, she pointed her fingers at the fairy penguin's direction and then turned around once more to the direction of the Humboldt Penguin with her phone. She did not appear to have any intention of using her phone, rather, just grasping it strongly with her hands.

"..... I see."

Seeing her in that state, I hesitated to say anything more. With that short answer, I took one step forward, one step in the direction of the building. The cries of the birds continued on behind me. The calls of the two penguins now seems to be just a little sadder now.

Having been outside for such a long time, the warmth of the building inside made me puffed out a breath. Advancing along the road from the penguin zone, it would lead to some stairs that descended down to the room below. There were still a couple more enormous fish tanks below. An explanation board there had the words "Seaweed Forest" inscribed on it. Yet despite what the sign said, all I could make out from afar was the large giant help, swaying and waving their "arms" about, swaying to and fro. Such big seaweed.

Other than the light brown kelp, the vivid red and green sea anemone and the corals illuminating the area, the room was otherwise pitch dark. There was even a bench intentionally placed in front of the water tank, making seem all the more like a small movie theatre. Yet, there wasn't so much a figure of anyone sitting down there now. It was deserted to say the least. However, in the direction of the water tank where the light was spilling out, the faint shadow of a person standing there could just be made out against the dark backdrop. That standing figure. There was no way I could mistake that for anyone else.

Yukinoshita Yukino.

Her appearance, illuminated by the dim light of the water tank in the darkness, caused her to resemble a painting. I couldn't call out to her. The breath that I wanted to spit out was stuck at the back of my heart.

Therefore, I stopped walking. Noticing the break in the sound of the footsteps, Yukinoshita turn towards my direction. She made a gesture that vaguely seemed to be nodding her head. With that, I began to walk towards her, little by little.

"Where's Yuigahama?" Yukinoshita asked as though she didn't see me whilst gazing at the tank, even though I was right beside her.

"Taking pictures of the fairy penguins. She said she would be coming right over soon so I should just wait here."

"I see."

On that note, our conversation ceased. We both simply continued to silently gaze at the water tank in front of us. The faint light from the giant seaweed illuminated the multicolored fish swimming about in the surroundings. There were countless fish swimming to and fro. Like the swaying giant kelp, they were swaying about as well, as though their movements were dependent on it. There were small fish with bluish scales hiding in the shadow of the seaweed. On the other hand, a particularly flashy red fish was leisurely swimming about, without a care in the world.

Yukinoshita's eyes chased after the fish's movement, and spoke all of a sudden.

".....They seem to be really free."

"Yup! Oh, that fish is quite big huh."

Yukinoshita's small voice did not seem to be directed at anyone. It was more of a monologue. But, I dare say we were observing the same fish. If so, then it was only natural for me to reply to that voice. A faint breath escaped my lips suddenly.

"If it can't find a place to go, it won't find a place that it belongs to. It will hide, ride with the current or follow whatever it can, until it crashes into the walls it can't see."⁶⁰

Yukinoshita gently stretched out her hand to touch the glass. However, before long, the hand grew powerless and was quietly lowered. Glancing at her from the side, I could not tell where her eyes were looking, just that she was definitely looking in front.

"Which fish are you talking about?"

I did not know what she was looking at, so I had to listen.

Thereupon, Yukinoshita gave her answer immediately, along with a seeming calm sigh.

"Myself....."

Saying that, she touched the water tank gently once again, a lonely smile on her face as she bent her neck slightly.

The figure of her extending her hand, it looked like she was about to be sucked into the water and yet, she was unable to return to the place she ought to go, owing to the obstruction by the glass wall. Just like the bubbles disappearing, this moment was short-lived.

The room was quiet; not a single sound could be heard. The sound of the bubbles gushing forth and bursting open could not reach us as it was blocked by the glass. As I watch Yukinoshita stare into the water tank as

⁶⁰ The words,居場所 and 寄る辺 means that it can be translated to either CR subs/ Commie Subs. I just chose to go along with CR subs due to Hikigaya's doubt over whether she may be referring to herself.

though she had been isolated from the world. As we stood there, the sound of one footstep could be heard.

Turning around, I saw Yuigahama watching over Yukinoshita with a calm gentle look. That expression on her face was one that was anywhere between gentle and ready to burst into tears.

“Sorry to have kept the two of you waiting!”

Yuigahama gave a big wave with her hands as if just noticing us, and called out to us with a smile on her face like always.

Exiting from the giant help exhibition, the interior of the building quickly grew brighter. Perhaps due to the lighting at the top portion of the wall, the glass becomes glazed and the ceilings too appeared high up. The floor until now had appeared to be covered with a black fabric, but now, the cream-colored wooden planking was evident. Tap,tap,tap, thanks to those seemingly energetic steps, I could hear her walking along nimbly. The sound of the footsteps stopped abruptly. I wondered what she saw.

“Ah, come here, come here!”

Saying that, she beckoned for me and Yukinoshita to come. Calling out to us, she invited us to see the numerous cylindrical shaped water tanks.

Pink and purple, marine blue. The various colours of the light-up illuminated the jelly-fish floating and drifting about the inside of the water tanks. Yuigahama leapt at Yukinoshita’s arms, and the two of them watched the spectacle side by side. The water tank had a small round window for people to look through. Hence, it was a little cramped for three people to view it at once, thus, I took a step back to where I could view it comfortably.

“Wow, this kind of looks like fireworks!”

Whilst watching the wiggling shaking jellyfish, Yuigahama murmured in a voice that was as if she was reminiscing of something.

“Oh?” However, jellyfish are jellyfish. Even as I looked closely at them, I found myself wondering how they even resembled fireworks.

Yuigahama turned her head towards me and pointed to a spot in the water tank.

“Don’t you see it? There, at that place. Pewwww, Bannngggg.”

The jellyfish that Yuigahama was pointing at, it had a star-shaped body. It contracted and relaxed its body, contracted and relaxed, the same action being repeated over and over again.

Even if you said that, I am still pretty sure that I couldn’t see the resemblance to the fireworks.

“Oh, I get it now. Maybe if the round ones spread its body out, it would resemble something like that.”

With that answer, Yuigahama shook her small head. And so, once again, this time, the glass was touched again by a finger.

“That’s not it, here.....”

Saying that, she point at the jellyfish at the back with the long tentacles protruding from its body. The long tentacles contracted momentarily, before unfolding once more.

The lights from the light-up were sparkling. It continued to linger on and spread throughout the water like a golden shower.

I have seen this type of fireworks some time ago.

That was during summer. In the park that was crowded with people, several enormous STARMINE ascended into the heavens, reflected on

the glass of the Chiba Tower's half mirror glass. ⁶¹With the launching of the finale, it certainly was a golden shower. The sparkling night sky, left behind traces of that light as always. The memory of that scene. I could see it now, right in the water tank in front of me.

In front of me, Yuigahama moved closer to Yukinoshita.

"Too close....."

"Ehehe"

Yuigahama paid no heed to her as Yukinoshita twisted her body in bewilderment.

All of a sudden, she grabbed hold of Yukinoshita and planted herself directly in front of the water tank.

Looking at the reflection in the glass, I confirmed that I was really behind the two of them.

And so, Yuigahama closed her eyes for the brief moment.

"I am really glad.... That the three of us could see this, together."

Words that sounded of relief, just like her sigh.

Those words were strange yet I am sure I understood them. Yukinoshita tugged her jaw and nodded in agreement as well. I could not say for sure, but I dare say that at that time, what we were all feeling, was probably not all that different. It was an illusion that I held on to.

We came out from the bright corridor, and exited to the area with the restaurant and shops. Turning to the left here would lead us to the outside. It seemed like the road ended here. As it is, if one were to ascend the stairs, then they would be back at the entrance.

⁶¹ Starmine = fireworks launched rapidly in quick succession.

Looking back from the entrance, if one were to take the path to the right, it would lead to the place where we first the water tanks with the hammerhead sharks. That is to say, here was exactly one round of the aquarium park.

“GOAL!”

Yuigahama jumped about spiritedly, and turned towards our direction.

‘Hey, let’s go for another round!’

“No way. There’s no point in visiting the same places again.”

“Y...Yes. I agree. I am kind of a little tired after all.”

In contrast to Yuigahama, Yukinoshita appeared dead tired.

Walking to and fro in this manner, it was no wonder that Yukinoshita appeared so tired. It would be difficult for someone like her with so little stamina after all.

My gaze shifted to Yuigahama. Would you please kindly take a look at Yukinoshita, was what I was implying.

Thereupon, whilst Yuigahama fumbled about with the “bun” on her hair, I could see the look of reluctance on her as we had already arrived here on this road.

“Is that so?..... I think that it would’ve been fun. It’s not time yet anyway.....”

Yuigahama checked her watch as she said so. Then, something seemed to have caught her attention.

“Ah!”

Raising her voice, she pointed at the enormous Ferris wheel in the distance.

Japan’s top-class Ferris wheel. It was indeed huge.

Taking the Ferris wheel ticket from my chest pocket and flipping it over. I read that it was 111m in diameter and 117m in overall height.

Well, I can't really describe how tall it actually is in reality. It is difficult to come up with a precise analogy to describe it. However, if I had to use one word to describe it, it would be tall. Also, scary.

The fact that I just subconsciously described it in another word is indeed scary.

Yuigahama planned to ride the Ferris wheel as there wasn't much of a queue now. After purchasing the ticket, we were able to board the Ferris wheel immediately.

And thus, the horror begins.

Thinking about it, it was about 10 years since I last rode the Ferris wheel. Naturally, I became so anxious about it that my feet were trembling as I walked. As the carriage of the Ferris wheel ascended, a curious sense of adventure washed over me. The subtle swaying by the wind gave me the feeling that I was risking my life.

"Scary....." An unintentional whisper escaped me.

However, it was just a whisper. A gentleman will not get flustered in front of the two of them. Then again, if I were riding this alone, I would probably be hugging my trembling head by now.

Now then, speaking of the two of them. They were seated side by side. I wondered how they were faring.

"Waaa, so high! Scary! I mean, this is shaking so madly!" She was having such a fun time that she was clinging on to the windows, almost rising out of her seat in joy. Thanks to her, my earlier whisper of "scary" was not heard. On the other hand, Yukinoshita had turned pale. She was not looking at the scenery outside, just staring intently at her feet.

"Weren't you listening just now? I told you we didn't have to do this if you really didn't want to."

Yukinoshita gave a wry smile, knowing that I would say something along those lines. Thereupon, Yukinoshita definitely gave a gentle gaze in my direction.

“It’s nothing……. Everyone, together…….”

She averted her gaze whilst saying that. And then, at that instant, the view of the world below us probably entered her vision. Her voice stuck in her throat. And then, as if pleading for help, she stretched out her hands towards Yuigahama. She gripped her arms firmly and forced her to seat down.

“Yuigahama-san. You can’t do that whilst in the Ferris wheel. Did you not read the instructions.”

“Yukinon, you look scary! S... Sorry, I was just having so much fun…….”

“It’s not that I am particularly bothered by you having fun, it’s just that certain standards have to be upheld.”

Ahaha, Yuigahama laughed as she apologized to Yukinoshita, who had a cold expression as she chided Yuigahama. However, Yukinoshita made no attempts to release her hold on Yuigahama’s arms.

Noticing that her hand was being held, Yuigahama returned it with a firm squeeze, and closed the distance between her and Yukinoshita.

And then, I could see the girls pointing towards the right.

“Look, that way! Yukinon’s house is probably that way. Ah, if only we could go closer in that direction, we could probably see it.

“It’s magnificent. I think there’s more than enough to see from here.”

Despite saying that, Yukinoshita firmly refuses to move. However, she timidly began to take a peek towards the scenery outside the window. Haaaa, and so, she let out a sigh, one that was full of wonder and satisfaction.

Enticed by her, I too, looked out of the windows to survey the scenery outside.

The evening scenery of the snow falling thick and fast over Chiba unfolded before my eyes.

In the distance, the townscape was generously given a layer of thin white make-up.

“It’s so beautiful....”

I nodded my head at Yuigahama’s words. I truly felt the same way as her.

“Ah, as expected of my Chiba~”

“Since when did they become yours?”

“For the time being. But this place here, it’s in Tokyo isn’t it.

“Edogawa is one of the 23 wards of Tokyo you know? Anyway, this place is closer to Kasai. I highly doubt you can see Chiba from here. “

Hearing me say such a thing, Yuigahama giggled whilst Yukinoshita smiled at me in astonishment.

And so, we continued gazing upon the view that stretched out before us, never getting tired of it.

The usual conversation, the usual atmosphere, I thought that that was just like us. And yet, there was this indecisiveness and uncertainty that lingered at my feet.

The Ferris wheel gradually began its descent.

Hiding its instability, it continues to turn slowly. It does not make any progress, just going round and round in the same location as always. But even so, eventually.....

“..... It’s almost over.” She murmured.

Chapter 9

The Spring, buried underneath the snow, begins to sprout

As the Ferris wheel descended, the snow continues on in a flurry.

The park's lawn was covered with a thin white layer, silently telling us of the time that has passed by. Somehow or another, we remained silent as we walked along the park's interior. Yuigahama walked forward, leading the way, followed by Yukinoshita and I.

Before long, the small path begin to merge with the long and large street from the station.

From here, if you continue on towards the left, it will lead towards the train station. If you turn right, then you will reach the beach.

"Hey....."

Yuigahama turned around suddenly, silently pointing her finger at the path ahead, as though asking us if we could stop by somewhere there.

It was the glass building I saw earlier on. It's name was CRYSTAL VIEW according to the display board. Probably a viewing platform for the Tokyo Bay I guess.

Glancing at my watch, I noticed that there's still some time before it's time to head home. "Let's go."

I stopped and urged Yukinoshita on, and so we began walking to catch up to Yuigahama who was waiting ahead.

And so, the two of them walked for a short while.

The viewing platform itself was already closed, but part of the terrace was still open. We were able to view the Tokyo Bay even from there. Snow fell into the silently swaying sea. The setting sun oozed from the clouds.

The faint red and deep turquoise colour brightened up the plain white.

"O!" Yuigahama cried out at the very scenery in front of her.

Yukinoshita took a few steps back as the wind teased her hair. She pinned it down as she gazed into the distance, seemingly full of emotions.

There was no one but us. The sea stretched out all the way in front of us. In the distance, lights lit up the town.

Perhaps, it was a scenery that can only be seen at this instant. Slowly, the time passed by calmly. That's why, it cannot continue on for long. Yuigahama leaned away from the fence of the terrace, and turned to look at us.

"What shall we do from here?"

"Go home?"

"That's not what I meant."

As I jest lightly, Yuigahama shook her head silently.

There was a serious edge to that voice. She took one step to our front and looked at us directly.

"About Yukinon. And also, about me. About us."

The words that were shot out made my heart jump. That uncomfortable feeling

I had always been embracing began to rapidly rear its head like a snake.

"What do you mean?" In between bouts of hesitation,

Yukinoshita enquires about the meaning behind those words.

Thereupon, rather than giving her an answer, Yuigahama gave me a serious look.

"Hikki, here, to thank you for that time."

And with that said, Yuigahama took something gently out from her bag. A beautiful wrapping that contained cookies was held reverently by both her hands.

When I saw that, I was so taken aback that I could hear myself catching my breath. Out of the corner of my eyes, I could see Yukinoshita clutching her bag, whilst weakly shaking her head. And then, she gazed downwards at her feet. Yuigahama came in front of me by passing through Yukinoshita's side.

"My consultation, do you remember it?"

"Ahhhh"

My reply was so soft it could barely be heard.

How could I forget it? It was mine, the Service Club's first consultation that we had received. In the end, at that time, all I did was to use words to confuse. The solution that I gave was a far cry from a true resolution. And yet, despite this, Yuigahama had been trying to solve it properly with her own strength. This, was plainly shown.

Yuigahama appeared puzzled, my hands would not move to take the cookies, but she pressed the cookies firmly onto my hand. There was now a weight firmly resting in my palm.

The cookies that I could see from the cellophane bag were irregularly shaped, or had traces of burn marks or had an unusual hue to it. I could not honestly say that it was pretty.

However, one could tell from a glance that it was homemade. From this result, one could tell the effort and seriousness she put into it despite her being bad at cooking.

Yukinoshita gazed blankly at the cookie in my hand and let out a mixed sigh.

"Handmade cookies? This, is made by you alone?"

"But it is a bit of a failure isn't it?"

Yukinoshita shook her small head as though that didn't matter at all whilst

Yuigahama brushed off her embarrassment with a smile.

"Yuigahama-san, you are... amazing."

Her voice seemed like she was trying to be kind, or perhaps there was a sense of longing to it. Yukinoshita looked shyly at Yuigahama.

Yuigahama returns her look with a happy smile.

"I said that I'd try it on my own. I said that I would do it my own way. And this is what I came up with."

And so Yuigahama gave her answer. "... That's why, this is just a thank you." With that said, Yuigahama puffed out her chest, and showed her bright smile.

If this was about that time, then the matter should have already been settled. What's past is past, it has already ended. I do not want to dig it up now after such a long time. If this was about thanking me, then I have already received more than enough.

That's why, it was illogical of me to receive this gift of thanks.

It's time to end what was already wrong in the beginning. It should still be possible for us to start over again. If that's the case, perhaps the feelings that were trapped inside, the answers too will change.

Supposing. Supposing if. If those feelings became anything special.

I averted my eyes from Yuigahama, and my throat let out a strangled voice. "You have already thanked me enough"

I did not want to confirm whether it was really just a gift of thanks.

Even so, whether it was really just a gift, I can't just accept it without giving it a second thought.

However, I was assaulted by a sense of regret the instance I said it. From what I could see, Yuigahama's face looked ready to burst into tears.

"Still, it's just a thank you."

Yuigahama spoke with a voice that sounded like she was being crushed to death.

Her expression was contorted as she bit her lips lightly. To hide the gleam from her eyes, she quickly turned her back to us.

"I want everything. Now, and from here on. I know I am unfair, mean even."

She sulked in a low tone as she faced the sky, weaving her words. It seemed to be a monologue rather than seeking some form of rebuttal or answer from us. Therefore, whilst looking at her back, the least that I could do was to listen carefully so as not to miss a single word. When she was done talking, her white breath rose up and melted away into nothingness. With that, she turned around and looked straight at us.

"I have already decided." Yuigahama's eyes were no longer wet, her gaze now reflected a strong sense of determination.

"I see....." Yukinoshita's murmur betrayed a sense of resignation. I was unable to utter even a single word.

Yuigahama gave us a small lonely smile.

"If we find out about each other's feelings, I think we won't be able to stay the way we are now. That's why, this is probably our last consultation. Our last request will be about us."

There was not one specific thing that she said. If she had said it out, then that would've confirmed it for all of us. She was just avoiding the matter.

Vaguely, faintly, she continued on without addressing the issue.

That's why, there's no guarantee that our thoughts envisioned the same thing.

However, there is no helping it in this case, Those words only appear to be the truth.

It was a suspicion that I had held in the corner of my mind for a very long time. It was something that Yuigahama was acutely aware of.

And now, one more person. Yukinoshita was looking down with her eyes closed. Her expression was unclear, but it was not one of objection, nor was it an interrogative look, just one that was listening in silence.

I think that even Yukinoshita has realized that.

"Ne, Yukinon, that contest we are having is still on right?"

"Yes, the loser will have to listen to whatever the winner says."

Yukinoshita answered in bewilderment as she had not anticipated such a question.

Thereupon, Yuigahama touched Yukinoshita's arm softly, faced her directly and said clearly.

"The problems that Yukinon is facing right now, I know the answer." With that she patted Yukinoshita's arm softly.

The problems that plagues Yukinoshita, they have always been the reason behind her actions and words. More than anything else, Haruno Yukinoshita had clearly stated it. The Yukinoshita Yukino of today, what's the best way to help her? I do not know. What could it be? The relationships with her mom, her sister? It could probably be one of them, then again, it probably would be one of them.

Yukinoshita hung her head in bewilderment. I don't understand, she murmured in a fading voice.

Yuigahama nodded her head gently and her hand left Yukinoshita.

"I think it is probably the answer for us as well." In the end, I still did not get it. Neither me nor her.

If I understood it, then it would probably fall apart. The things that we have been ignoring would slowly fall apart.

Hence, no matter what the end is, it is inevitable that something will be lost.

In conclusion, the solution lies in the road ahead.

Yuigahama once again cut off her words and shook her small head.

And so, in addition to that, we found ourselves suddenly staring at each other.

"If I win, I'll take everything. It's probably unfair. But it's the only thing I can think of. I want things to always remain this way."

That's why, the answer that Yuigahama gave at first, it disregarded conditions, assumptions, equations, everything. It was just one of the obvious conclusions.

For example, even after all the processes, no matter what situations may await us, even if it would be impossible to reach an agreement, at least our answer would not change. It may seem like a lie, but those fun times would always continue on.

"What do you think?"

"What do I... That is...."

I choked on my words as I was posed that question by Yuigahama.

In retrospect, even if it means resorting to twisted methods or distorting the truth, I would still have held on to my answer, I would still have

done it. Even if it's impossible under normal circumstances, as long as I was compelled, no, as long as I could justify it, then that wish would come true.

If I had made such an excuse, I would surely have convinced myself. I think that if times like this could continue on, then surely a little bit of discomfort for the sake of our happiness would be worth it.

Above all.

Yuigahama is probably not wrong. I have a hunch that she had always seen the right answer. I think that it would definitely be easier to just accept it. However....

Is leaving the incorrect things the way they are the right thing to do? Surely, that is the truth that we are seeking?

Yuigahama looked on kindly as I gnashed my teeth attempting to answer her. Following that, she gently took Yukinoshita's hand.

"Yukinon, is that OK?" Yuigahama posed the question to her like a mother asking her child.

Upon being asked, Yukinoshita's shoulders trembled. "Wa ta, shi wa..."

She averted her eyes to escape Yuigahama's gaze. Even so, she was unable to give a proper response. Her thin voice faltered as she tried to craft her reply.

The instant I saw the state she was in, I knew it then. Ahh... this is wrong. She is wrong.

Yukinoshita shouldn't be entrusting her own future to someone else. There is no way that that can be right. Yuigahama is an unfair girl, but surely, saying such a thing can't be right.

“Even so, I...” “No.” I interjected.

Yukinoshita looked at me in surprise upon hearing my slightly raised voice.

“I cannot accept this proposal. Yukinoshita should solve her own problems herself.” Clenching my fists suddenly, I faced Yuigahama. I saw Yuigahama’s mouth tensing up, with an unusually cold look in her eyes.

Yuigahama Yui is a nice girl, I had decided that for myself willfully. Yukinoshita Yukino is a strong girl. I had forced that ideal onto her. Having said that, I have always been relying on their kindness. However, this is exactly why, this reliance must end. I can no longer run away from that kindness or repay it with a pack of lies. After all, that is why Yuigahama Yui is a nice girl and Yukinoshita Yukino is a strong girl.

“Besides, that’s nothing but... deception.” The words that I spat out disappeared to the waves. And just like a cycle, the waves continue to surge forward, being pulled along continuously. No one made any sound.

Yukinoshita looked at my moist eyes and her lips trembled whilst Yuigahama gave me a small nod as she looked upon my dim eyes, waiting for me to continue my words.

“Be it vague answers or superficial relationships, I don’t need any of those.”

What I wanted was something else. I know that I am being an idiot. I know that that’s definitely not it. I know how this will end, that I will end up with nothing. But still.

“Even so, I want us to think, to writhe, to struggle. I ...”

The words that I wanted to say just wouldn't come.

I know that this is not right. If you could say that it's enjoyable, then I suppose it's all right after all.

If in the unlikely future, we are able to live as we like, then I suppose no one would have to suffer. However, I want to discard away all those ideals. I do not possess the strength to continue living in these delusions. On top of self-doubt, I had no wish of telling any lies to those that I care about greatly. That's why, the answer that I want. I want to obtain the answer I desire without lies.

Exhaling a hot breath, realizing that I was not going to continue on, Yuigahama looked at me directly.

"... Hikki, I thought you would say something like that." Yuigahama smiled gently with a grin on her face.

At that instant, a tear swiftly flowed down her cheek. What should I do? It would have been fine if not for the unsightly face.

Yuigahama and I exchanged glances, and gave a small nod to each other.

Her wish and mine were not visible. However that shape that it takes differs slightly and may not perfectly overlap. Despite saying that, it is not definite that they cannot become one.

No matter how I looked at it, there certainly exists a link somewhere. With that in mind, I turned and glanced at Yukinoshita.

Yukinoshita clutched her chest tightly. The teary-eyed Yuigahama and looked at each other. There was a fleeting tremble in that look of unease. Yet, when I realized that I had been waiting all this while for her answer, I took a small deep breath.

“Don’t decide my feelings for me.” Yukinoshita rubbed her eyes as she sulked.

“Also, that’s not the last of anything. Hikigaya-kun, we still have your request.”

My request. Just as I was about to ask her about it, Yuigahama interrupted with a faint smile. She gave a nod to Yukinoshita. They smiled at each other as though they shared a secret known only to the two of them.

“And, one more thing.” Yukinoshita offered a smile, and turned her ever beautiful face towards us. As I waited for her to continue her words, she took a step. A step towards us. One gentle step.

“My request, will you hear it?” In between bouts of embarrassment, Yukinoshita said those words, to which Yuigahama smiled broadly.

“Sure, let’s hear it.”

With her answer, Yuigahama takes one more step forward, shortening the distance between us, and gently held out her hand. Before long, the evening’s setting sun and the sea casted silhouettes upon the white canvas.

It was faint, hardly reliable and the form it took was indistinct. But they definitely were linked, and they will definitely become one. If only, if wishes could materialize. That is definitely.....